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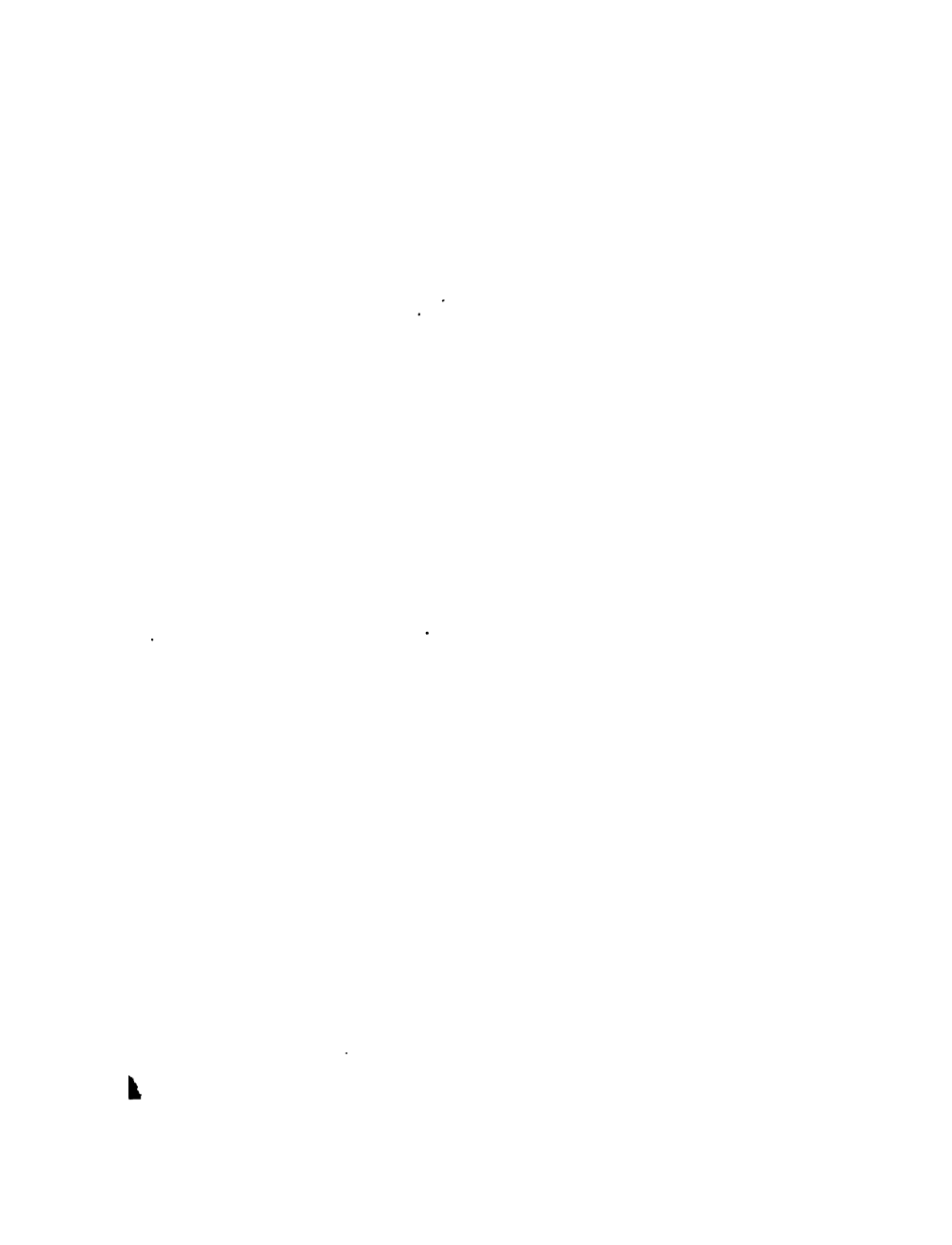
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LIKE A GALLANT LADY

LIKE A GALLANT LADY

BY

KATE M. CLEARY

*"The World's male chivalry has perished out,
But Women are Knights Errant to the last.
And if Cervantes had been Shakespeare too,
He'd made his Don, a Donna."*

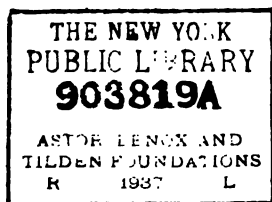
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CHICAGO
WAY AND WILLIAMS

1897

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QV W38
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1897

TO NEBRASKA.

*To the village and the plain
Of a land of toil and pain,
Of a land where drouth devourereth
Making labor void and vain;
Where ambitions cease to glow,
Where high hopes are buried low,
And the mad mirage of other
Lands, the sweetest thing we know.*

*To a land that yet shall be
Fair and fertile, proud and free,
Golden grain and happy homesteads,
'Twixt the east and western sea—
From a woman whom the west
Harbored bride, and slave and guest,
Has been kind to—has been cruel—
And has given worst—and best!*

LIKE A GALLANT LADY

CHAPTER I.

"Here comes the lady!"

—*Romeo and Juliet.*

"WHEN I have enough money to make the folks—barring mother, God bless her!—consider me respectable, I'll go home, marry Edith, and live happy ever after."

Jack Jardine, glowing with approbation of his righteous resolution, entered the Owl-King saloon and treated his decision with gravity and decorum. Six years before, when he left the home of his forefathers beyond the ocean, he bore with him the very willing consent of his paternal relative, the plaintive protest of his mother, four

thousand pounds, three trunks and the generously accorded advice of several friends not to make a fool of himself again. From this recommendation the deduction may be made that Jack Jardine had not been as wise as he was handsome—which would, indeed, have been a good deal to expect. The week of his arrival in New York he lost one thousand pounds. The remainder he invested in a cattle ranch in Nebraska. His investment brought handsome returns. Even in the seasons of drouth that followed he was fairly successful. He was shrewd, alert, daring, some said unscrupulous. At all events, he increased the boundaries of his property, put money in bank, built a house and contradicted generally the charitable predictions of his people in England that when he no longer felt the restraint of their presence his downfall would be rapid and sure as the stick of a rocket.

Suddenly a whistle sounded. The

men in the saloon bolted for the door and tore wildly down the street. Jardine finished his whisky, and, in leisurely fashion, followed them. The abrupt exodus signified the approach of the train from the East, which came in every second day. The population of Bubble invariably assembled in force on these occasions. A freight car, in which a couple of boards laid lengthwise did service for seats, accommodated passengers. From this compartment stepped a young and pretty woman. Her gown, the poise of her head, the way she walked, distinguished her as city-bred. Her glance swept her surroundings. She saw the dull, red depot and section-house, the staring crowd of flannel-shirted, top-booted men, of clumsy women, of gaping children; the brand new buildings, many in process of erection, straggling across riven cornfields; the bluffs, some steep, some sloping, which encircled the bowl-shaped hollow of the embryo town.

"Hotel? Imperial hotel, Miss? Check?"

She surrendered a bit of brass to the lad soliciting her custom, and turned to follow him up the solitary sidewalk the town boasted. Jack Jardine, lounging against the station-house, became mechanically deferential as she drew nearer. He straightened up, and put his pipe in his pocket. A startled look flashed into his face. He turned quickly to the conductor.

"Who is she, Wilkins?"

Wilkins was a person of importance. He possessed the latest news, answered innumerable questions, and was supposed to know the personal history of each passenger.

"Her name is Lyle—a relative of Rob's, I suppose. She had a through ticket."

"Lyle?" echoed Jardine sharply.

"That's it. Catch on to the chap we hauled without getting wrecked. Ain't he a daisy? Well, so long." He swung himself on the moving train,

threw a kiss to a beaming Bohemian girl on the platform and went rocking westward.

"Well," drawled a voice of disgusted astonishment at Jardine's elbow, "jest look at that ther' feller! I'll be dog-goned!"

Jardine looked up and saw the passenger to whom Wilkins had so irreverently referred. He was a youngish man, squat and very stout. His round, heavy-featured face was crimson and clean-shaven. His nose was a pronounced pug. His mouth was large and smiling. His eyes—in one of which a monocle was screwed—were small, twinkling, friendly. He wore a showy plaid suit, abbreviated as to coat and voluminous as to trousers. The helmet of the British tourist adorned his head. A massive gold chain, from which a bunch of seals depended, dangled across his vest. His satin tie was pink as the skin of a Bougereau nymph. In one yellow-gloved hand he carried two satchels. The other gripped a bundle

of canes and umbrellas, and held a long, steel chain to which was attached a diminutive dog. The people on the platform contemplated him with disrespectful interest as he approached Jardine, set down the satchels, held out his hand.

"How d'ye do?" he asked pleasantly, showing a mouthful of big, sound, white teeth. Jardine, blue-shirted and corduroy-clad, wearing battered top boots and an ancient hat, fairly gasped.

"It's Jennings!"

Mr. Jennings smiled a vast welcome for himself. "Yes," he assented cordially, "it's me."

Jardine's fingers just touched the yellow kid glove. "I suppose," he ventured, "you're out in this country on sport."

"Partly sport, dear boy. Chiefly business."

"Oh, by the way," said Jardine, as a recollection struck him, "I haven't forgotten that fifty pounds I borrowed from you once. I did not know where to

send it since my mother mentioned that your father had been left money and had taken his family to town."

"I had forgotten it, I assure you," with a wave of one ham-like hand.

"I got your address from your lawyers when I made up my mind to come out here. Beastly country, isn't it? And why, my dear Jack, do you wear such shocking clothes?" Jardine reddened at the familiarity. Evidently Jennings considered that the democracy of the West rendered impertinence permissible.

"We don't require fine raiment here," he explained patiently.

"But," persisted Peter Jennings, "I should think you'd dress as we do at home, once in a while, if only to astonish the natives."

"I shall allow you that privilege," Jardine murmured blandly.

Peter glanced around at the few individuals who stood grinning at him.

"Indeed," he gurgled, pluming himself, "it does look as if they'd never seen anyone like me before."

"They never have, Jennings," Jack assured him, "never!"

They walked up town together. Jennings was curious about his fellow passenger, and decidedly enthusiastic.

"Prettiest girl I've seen since I left England, 'pon my word. I must say she was not at all inclined to be sociable, though I shall manage to be regularly introduced. Never would have thought you people out here would be formal about such things. Hello! what's this?" Jardine had paused before a long, low frame building. At the door a skinny little girl was beating a tin pan vigorously with a poker. Jennings regarded her much as he might have done a trained chimpanzee, and she returned the look with interest.

"The hotel," returned Jardine.

"It is, is it? Why don't you ask me to your place?"

"I'm positive you couldn't endure it. It's only an apology for a house. A good bit out, too. Then the man who does my work can't cook. I'll see you

again." He nodded and walked off.

"The devilish old Jardine pride," muttered Jennings. "He can't forget that I'm the son of his father's butler."

In truth Jardine had considered that fact less than that the man who had renewed acquaintanceship with him was ill-bred. He plunged across the street to a small frame building which bore the sign:

PRIOR, LYLE & DUDLEY,
GRAIN AND REAL ESTATE.

Jardine flung open the door and walked in. The building consisted of two rooms. The furniture of the front room was a high desk, that was half counter, a sheet-iron stove, a couple of chairs and a lounge. Cartoons from a political paper were pinned on the walls. A sallow little man sat by the window.

"Prior," cried Jardine, "you recollect that girl Mark Dudley told us

about—Rob Lyle's sister? He showed us her picture. His sweetheart, you know."

Prior looked up from his paper. His eyes had a trick of contracting and expanding like the eyes of a cat.

"What about her?"

"She came in on the train, just now."

Prior dropped his feet from the chair back. "Did, eh? She's late for the funeral."

Jardine pushed his hat back on his neck, and stood leaning one elbow on the high counter. "Suppose," he asked, looking moodily at Prior, "Rob lets out the truth sometime when he's full—what then?"

Prior cackled.

"Oh, trust Lyle to hold his tongue about that business. He's got sense enough to keep still."

A wagon laden with corn rumbled on the scale without. Prior rose to weigh it. Jardine sat staring out through the grimy window. Suddenly he pulled himself up.

"I'm off for a ride," he said, and went out. Prior glowered after him. "Confound a fellow with a conscience anyhow," he said.

Jardine saddled his horse himself at the livery barn across the street, swung into the saddle and turned north. Past the hardware store, a couple of drug-stores, the postoffice—which was also the general store and harness shop—by a few box-like residences, up the hill he went, then down on the other side, over a bridge, and off across the swelling prairies. It was an afternoon in early December. The first snow of the year had fallen and vanished, and the road, roughened by successive frost and thaw, stretched before in irregular brown ridges. Overhead and toward the east the sky was of tenderest blue, all swirled with streaks of rose. In the creek the shallow water was filmed with ice. "The gentleness of rain was in the wind." To the skeleton trees clung leaves of shriveled saffron. The roadsides were rank with the silveri-

ness of thistledown, the sienna of withered goldenrod, the dun tangle of dead sunflowers. Everywhere was sky and prairie and silence oppressive to sadness. A ground squirrel sat up, then scurried away. A covey of quails whirred before the horse's feet. Shadows crept stealthily up the draws. An amethystine haze softened the outlines of the bluffs.

"Night, by Jove!" said Jardine. "I must get back." He wheeled his horse around and gave it a pat on the flank. The animal fell into a long lope, and swiftly bore him townward. The face of the girl from the East haunted him. Its persistent presence irritated him. He desired to see her again. He wondered if Rob had since appeared and taken her out of town. Perhaps she had hired a rig and gone out to him. In what condition would she find him?

Away to the east as he rode was vastness, desolateness, a darkening sky; to the west were fields flooded with



lemonish light. Over these an ocean of faintest green seemed to pulse and intermerge, an ocean that was rippled with gold, flecked with pearl and blurred with a vapory violet.

The girl with the tin pan and the poker was beating the summons to supper when he went into the rambling building which rejoiced in the name of "The Imperial Hotel." The only light in the passage came from a door farther down. Jardine almost fell over a short man, a chain and a dog. He apologized absently as he recognized Peter Jennings. He had forgotten the existence of Peter Jennings.

"Had to come back to town—on business," he said. "Have you had supper?"

"I ordered dinner served in my room," explained a miserable voice, "but the people laughed at me—actually laughed in my face. So I came down into their—ah—dining-room, in accordance with the custom here, but I was obliged to leave. The food

was uneatable—quite uneatable. I am going out to find a restaurant.”

“You won’t find one,” Jack told him. “When men in this town want a luncheon they go into a store and buy some crackers and cheese or a can of cove oysters, and eat there.”

Leaving his compatriot aghast and hungry, he passed on to the dining-room. There a couple of malodorous lamps flared. Four tables were clothed in crumpled red cloths and half covered with coarse crockery. On the wall hung a fly-specked sign. Its request the season rendered unnecessary:

“GENTLEMEN WILL PLEASE WEAR COTES
AT TABEL.”

Jardine took a seat. Half a dozen grimy section hands were eating at an adjacent table. A few of the store-keeping populace appeared. A trio of drummers made merry together. Richard Prior came in and sat down next Jardine. The daughter of the house, a pretty child, whose associations had

made her precociously coquettish, fluttered around, waiting on the guests. The unsavoriness of the supper was accentuated by its accessories. The resistful steak, the stewed raisins and the bitter, whitish decoction called tea were not tempting. Prior ate heartily. Jardine sat silent and watched the door. Involuntarily he leaned forward. Prior also looked up. A young girl, unobtrusively gowned, was standing on the threshold. Her face was attractive—the features delicate and piquantly irregular. She had a mass of tawny hair and a clear, pale skin. Large, dark eyes looked out from under thick, black lashes and straight black brows.

“Is that Mark’s sweetheart?” whispered Prior.

“Shut up!” growled Jardine, and he supplemented his command by a deep and fervent curse breathed in Prior’s ear. He was lighting a cigar in the office when the landlady came up to him. “Oh, Mr. Jardine, I’ve been looking for you. I seen you go

in to supper. I'm thinking maybe you'll drive the young lady that came in on the train to-day out to her brother's—Rob Lyle's, you know."

Jardine looked at her in dismay.

"The teams has been out'n the liv'ry all afternoon or she'd have gone before this. Now they got one back, but Lame Jim says as how he's promised to drive some girls over to a dance in Kansas. Rob's place ain't much out'n your way, and he can bring in the team to-morrow. Will you?"

"I'd rather not," Jardine returned decidedly. "Doesn't Lyle expect her?"

"No. He only got back from St. Joe last night. He was looking pretty bad—you know."

Jack gave a grunt of disgust. "Oh, Lord, yes, I know." He nibbled thoughtfully at the end of his cigar. "What if he's keeping up the spree? He does sometimes. It wouldn't do to take her out there in that case. Let me think a minute. I have it," He

straightened up and shied his cigar at the stove. "I'll drive her as far as Mc's, and leave her there while I go up and find out how Rob is. I'll say he's not at home and have her stay over night with the old lady if he happens to be too bad."

"That's a good plan. Will you go in and see her now? She's in the parlor."

Jardine hesitated. Then he said, "Yes, I'll see her."

A minute later he was in an ugly little room, and, with a feeling akin to cowardice found himself bowing to Ivera Lyle.

CHAPTER II.

"I am not bound to please thee with my answers."

—*Merchant of Venice.*

THE landlady had fumbled over an awkward introduction and gone out. Jardine lifted his head. Miss Lyle was regarding him with an expression of dismayed recognition.

"I shall be glad to drive you out to your brother's, Miss Lyle," he said. "I have known Rob since I came out here six years ago."

"I did not quite catch the name mentioned." Jack found the modulations of her voice delicious, after those, nasal or strident, to which he had become accustomed. "It is Jardine, is it not?"

"Jardine," he replied,—"Jack Jardine."

The look she still bent upon him embarrassed him. It possessed a

mysterious intimacy. It indicated a certain unfriendliness.

"Yes?"

Evidently she expected him to say more. He flushed darkly. "It is just possible Rob may have spoken of me in his letter—he, or Mark Dudley. We were close friends." Instantly he felt furious with himself that he had presumed to tell her, even indirectly, that he was aware of the relation she had borne to Mark Dudley.

"Yes," said the soft voice, "they both wrote of you. I recognized you at once—but not by any description."

"I—I beg your pardon."

"Later, perhaps, I shall tell you how. Can you give me any particulars concerning Mr. Dudley's death? I did not receive the telegram until two days after the funeral took place."

"Oh, there was a mistake about sending the message," Jardine hastily assured her. "Rob and his partner, Mr. Prior, each supposed I had sent it. I left the matter to them. It was all so very sudden, so—so unexpected."

With a slight gesture she declined the chair he had placed for her.

"It was sudden I know, but—was it unexpected?"

"Dudley was ill but a short time," said Jardine. His fine, beardless face had lost its sudden flush.

"Had he a doctor?"

"He had consulted a physician. Eldridge—we have only one medical man in this benighted place—chanced to be out of town when the case developed. When he returned all was over."

Gripping the top bar of the chair with one hand, and holding his old felt hat in the other, Jardine waited for the next question. It came, deliberately as the others.

"Was there an inquest?"

A look of fear flashed across his face. Ivera Lyle saw it. An inquest! How politely judicial she was in her inquiries! Somehow she made him think of Portia in the trial scene! And he had been dreading a meeting

with a lovesick, hysterical girl. "No, the certificate was explicit and comprehensive. An inquest was not considered necessary." A silence followed. They could hear a drummer, cordial and communicative, stamping up the stairs to his room. Through the thin walls there came from the adjacent building the querulous wail of a sleepy child.

"I hope I am not wearying you," Miss Lyle said, "but what is the reputation of the physician who issued the certificate of death?"

The sinewy hand on the chair back tightened its grip until the knuckles showed white. "It is similar to that of many men of his class who drift to these new and unsettled Western towns."

The landlady put her head in at the door.

"The rig's ready, Mr. Jardine. You better drive fast if you don't want a wetting. Looks like 'twas going to rain cats and dogs." Ten minutes

later Jardine helped Miss Lyle into the buggy that stood before the hotel door. The rain had begun, a gentle mist that was little more than an exaggerated dew. Scattered lights twinkled around them as Jardine wheeled the horses south. A red glow from the window of a small, dark building on the left caught the girl's eye. "Isn't that the office—their office? I noticed the name over it this afternoon."

"Yes, but Rob has stayed out on the farm since—since he lost Dudley. He leaves all the grain business to Prior, now."

"So he wrote me. Why is there a light at this hour?"

"Oh, Prior is at some of his confounded experiments, I dare say. He is one of those inquisitive devils who are eternally delving into mysteries, the sciences, the stars and all the isms. He has a regular laboratory back of the office."

He turned the horses' heads west.

The sprinkled lights, and the hilarity of the saloon were left behind. The two faced a gusty wind and a pelting rain.

"You are in Kansas, now, Miss Lyle. Bubble is on the state line. We drive across the creek and are no longer in Nebraska."

"But Rob lives in Nebraska."

"Oh, yes, we'll double back after a while. You've no idea, though, how exciting it is when village gossip palls to run over the bridge and assure yourself you've been taking a trip outside your adopted state."

"Have you men time for gossip?"

"None whatever. We make it—we take it. It's a mild dissipation at the best. Can you drive?"

"When I can see—yes."

"Take the reins then, please. The seeing doesn't matter. The team will keep the road all right."

Miss Lyle obeyed the peremptory instructions. He leaned down, pulled up a rubber covering, secured it at

her side and then at his own. "Now," he commanded, as he took the reins from her, "keep well down under that and the weather won't bother you."

"I don't mind the rain."

It was coming down hard, a fierce, black, winter storm straight in their teeth.

"You've got to mind it," he insisted, raising his voice to combat the wind. "Pull that rubber up to your eyes and hold it there."

The team were floundering up an ill-cut road in a steep bluff. The buggy careened sideways and slipped in the mire and running water.

"Hold on!" Jardine shouted encouragingly. "We'll be at the top presently. It isn't bad driving after that. Are you getting wet?"

"No."

"Are you afraid?"

"No."

"Got that rubber tucked high?"

"Yes."

"All right. Go ahead, Star! Get up, Dash!"

Slipping and sprawling, the horses ascended, the buggy wavering in a serpentine fashion behind them. So uncertain was the light that it was with a sort of instinct one knew that the whitish splash on the right was the wall of a cut or cliff—the blackness on the left the depth of a chasm. A final tug, a straining, a quick jolt, and the team were on the level ground and moving evenly forward. Here on this exposed upland the cold seemed suddenly to have become intense.

“I’m afraid you’ll take cold,” Jardine said. “I wish you had stayed at the hotel until morning.”

“One might as well rest in the booth of a fair.”

“The publicity is quite glaring, I admit. You must not expect to find Rob’s house comfortable. You know he lives in a shack and does his own housekeeping.”

“Cooking and all?”

“Cooking and all.”

She laughed out. “How funny—

for Rob. It is impossible to imagine it. He was such a fastidious boy."

"He is rather the reverse of fastidious now. You must not be easily shocked."

"I shan't." The airy confidence of the words made his heart sink. "I expected to rough it when I came out here."

There was a lull in the storm. The horses plowed through a wet, high growth that rattled and crackled sharply under the floor, against the sides, and on the roof of the buggy.

"Are we off the road?" asked Ivera Lyle.

"No—just passing through a clump of sunflowers. Like the poor, we have them always with us. They are almost as troublesome dead as alive."

The vehicle jolted down a hill. Below a light was twinkling through the rain.

"Is that Rob's place?"

"No, that's McLelland's. It's a little dug-out scooped in a bluff. It re-

joices, however, in a stone front. I'm going to leave you there till I find out if Rob is at home. His place is on the next section."

"Why can't I go straight on with you?" she asked quickly.

"Rob may not be there."

"The woman at the hotel said he got in from St. Joe last evening."

"But he has some law business to attend to at the county seat. He may have driven there to-day. You will wait here until I find out." He was driving down a zigzag declivity, directly toward the light.

"Well!" Miss Lyle gave a little gasp. "Are you not a trifle autocratic, Mr. Jardine?"

"We are everything that is reprehensible in this country, Miss Lyle," he assured her gravely. "Hello, there!" In the frame of yellow light, almost blocking up the doorway appeared the huge form of an old woman.

"Who's that?" she called in a sharp voice. "I know the team but I don't know you."

"Don't know me, Mrs. Mc?"

"It ain't you, Mr. Jardine?"

"Oh, but it is. Who-a, there, Dash! Now, Miss Lyle." He had jumped out. Holding the reins in one hand he extended the other to the occupant of the buggy.

"I submit under protest, Mr. Jardine."

"Oh, but you do submit. Take my arm. This way—here we are! Mrs. McLelland, this is Miss Lyle, Rob's sister. She came in from the East to-day, and could not get a rig to come out until this uncomfortable hour. Rob may not be home. You'll give her a cup of tea, I know, while I find out."

"To be sure I will. Come right in, Miss Lyle. Rainin' like all's out, ain't it? What part air you from? Chicago? Dear me, you don't say! I'm that glad to see you. I'm from Chicago myself, so we're fellow citizens, you might say. Leastwise, I lived within a hundred an' twenty mile of Chicago

for two year onct myself. Going, Mr. Jardine? You don't need to hurry. I'm a settin' up fur Pa. He's a-helpin' tend to old Smiley's corpse. You know what a hand Pa is for corpses, Mr. Jardine. Pa," she explained affably as the door closed behind him Jardine, "is the best layer-out you ever see. Not that he's in the business or ever has been, though he expects to be soon, seein' there's an openin' in Bubble. There can't be a corpse fur twenty mile around that Pa don't help tend to. Just seems to have a natural genius that way. It's a fine thing to have genius. I got some myself fur salt-riz biscuits an' chicking pot-pie. Ef you'll hand over that basket of cobs—my legs ain't what they was an' stoopin' is awful plausible on a body—this fire'll be a-bellerin' in no time."

While she talked, and Ivera, forgetting her indignation toward Jardine for compelling her to remain behind, listened, amused and interested, the man

who had brought her drove furiously westward along the muddy road. He drew up before a blacker patch in the pervading blackness. He sprang out and walked rapidly in the direction of the house that stood back from the road. The front door would not yield, so he went around to that in the rear. Its handle turned readily. He went in.

"Rob!" he called. "Oh, I say, Lyle!"

Not a sound.

Jardine fumbled in his pocket till he found a match. He struck it and lighted a lamp that stood on the table. The light revealed a small, bare room, a dirty table, on which was some stale bread and bologna sausage, and a low stove that was white with ashes. Jardine passed into the front room, the lamp in his hand. Here a boy lay asleep on a lounge. Some flashy papers and a couple of empty flasks were on a chair at his elbow. Jardine leaned down and shook him.

"Lyle! Look here, I say! Wake up! Your sister is down at Mc's. She'll be here directly." The recumbent young form limply swayed into a sitting posture. A flushed, weak, handsome face from under a tumbled mass of light brown hair gazed stupidly up at Jardine.

"Eh?" with a hazy smile. "What's up, Jack?"

Jardine looked around the dreary room in silence, and then back at the vaguely-smiling countenance of Rob Lyle. He pulled off his overcoat.

"Come on," he said.

"Where, Jack?"

"Come on."

He caught Lyle by the arm. The boy resisted. Jardine yanked him up and forcibly propelled him toward the kitchen. Here he relaxed his hold for an instant to light the lantern hanging on the wall.

"What in thunder are you up to?" blurted Lyle.

Jardine took up the lantern on his

arm and pulled Rob outside the back door. Guided by the sound of rushing water, he dragged him to the corner of the house. From a pipe into a huge rain-barrel the waters of the roof gutter were chug, chugging down at a great rate. Jardine set down the lantern, picked up Lyle and deposited him, head downward, in the rain-barrel. He jerked him up in a minute, sputtering and swearing.

"The d-de-devil take you!" howled Lyle. "Wh-what did I ever do to you, anyhow?"

"See here, I've told you your sister is coming up here to-night. You go in now and build a fire, and get rid of those bottles and straighten up generally. You understand?"

"What brought her out West?"

"Ask her. Will you mind what I told you?"

Another ducking seemed imminent. Rob retreated to a safe distance.

"I'll get an attack of pneumonia out of this, confound you."

"You'll get a thrashing if you let that little girl find out what a beast you are!" Jardine promised cordially.

He flung around to the road and drove back to McLelland's.

CHAPTER III.

"Are these things spoken? Or do I but dream?"

—*Much Ado About Nothing.*

"WELL, what do you think of it, I've?" asked Rob Lyle.

He had come to the door where his sister was standing, and had dropped his arm around her shoulders in half indifferent, half affectionate, brotherly fashion.

"It is different from what I imagined. I've always thought of Nebraska as level. I find its prairies are like the waves of a subsiding sea." She was looking out across the billowy undulations all plaided with the dull amber of cornstalks, the vivid green of winter wheat, the delicate daffodil of withered grass.

"It is level, in spots," he returned, laughing. "This doesn't happen to be one of the spots."

"But what weather! It is like May."

"Yes. The climate is like the land—delightful and detestable."

It was an idyllic morning, the sky blue and luminous, the earth wearing a fresh-washed face, the air crisp and caressing. There were shifting, silvery hazes on the distant bluffs, and to one city bred the absolute absence of sound was by contrast strangely restful.

"I like," the girl said, "the things out here that God made. I don't like those you men have made."

"Meaning my stately residence?"

"That—the town—many things. The house would not be so bad, if—"

"Speak on, oh, critic from the effete East!"

"Such polished sarcasm disarms me."

"That's right. Grind your heel into a fellow when he's down."

"Well, the house wouldn't be so bad if it were—"

"Clean and well-ordered."

"Please don't interrupt. Little boys never should. I didn't say that. I wouldn't put it that way."

"Don't hesitate. We who enter here leave sensitiveness behind—with other unnecessary emotions. Seriously, what does a child like you know about house-keeping?"

"You forget that I have been keeping house for Uncle James for several years."

"On Michigan boulevard?"

"Yes."

"With how many servants?"

"Five."

"And *carte blanche* as to expense?"

"Of course."

"Then you are fully qualified to become the mistress of a Nebraska farm."

"I'm fully qualified to inform you that the toast keeping hot in the oven will be dried into leather if we don't go in and eat it."

"Well," he capitulated across his coffee, "this is something like."

"Like what? You are explicit!"

"Like comfort."

She glanced significantly and silently around.

"Oh, as for that," Rob said, in a glow resultant on the fellowship, the propinquity, the morning and the meal, "as for that, I'll ride over to McLelland's after breakfast and see if she can't hunt up a helper for you. If anyone can the old lady is that individual."

"Mrs. McLelland? The undertaker's wife?"

"Oh, Lord!" roared Rob. "Has she been rubbing that into you already? Dear girl, you are anticipating events. She isn't an undertaker's wife. She is a farmer's wife. But this particular farmer has given many prophetic hours out of his prosaic existence to the proud day when he should own a hearse and share honors with the officiating clergyman at funerals. This hope has been burgeoning in the mind of his wife also. It has flowered for your benefit."

"You are right. I recollect now

that she only said her husband was about to buy out an undertaking business." She rose, poured water in the singing tea-kettle and came back to the table. "You'll get my trunk to-day, Rob? It is at the hotel."

"I will, my dear." He was eyeing approvingly her trig traveling costume. "Our prairie damsels don't dress like that, Ive."

"You haven't asked me why I came West."

"It is enough to know you are here."

"What a gallant speech! And to think of it wasted on your sister."

"I suppose that, finding yourself Uncle James' heiress, you decided to let the light of your countenance shine upon your exiled brother."

"It grows worse and worse! Upon whom have you been practicing your flatteries, Rob? The unfortunate girl has my sincere compassion. Seriously, Uncle's death gave me the opportunity to travel, but I have been wanting to come West since," she hesitated,

"since September." There was an odd change in her voice.

"I should not think you would care to come on account of Mark's death."

"That is the reason I came."

He looked at her blankly. "I don't understand you, Ivera."

She stood up and busied herself with the dishes. "I can't explain now—in the morning—in such sunshine."

"Is your reason so mysterious and uncanny," he asked, laughing, "that it may be whispered only in midnight darkness and elemental turmoil?"

"Don't!" she entreated.

He looked at her, his brows knit, and was silent.

Suddenly the sunshine was shut out. A huge shadow wavered across the floor. A mighty tread set the dishes dancing. A gigantic form, gowned in clean and crackling calico, loomed up before them. A square, clean-cut, alert, shrewd old face beamed down upon them.

"Well, if it isn't Mrs. Mc!" cried

Rob, jumping up and setting a chair for her.

Slowly, with great care and deliberation, the old lady let herself sink on the seat.

"It's them legs of mine," she explained.

"Yes," murmured Miss Lyle, politely but vaguely.

"Them legs of mine," continued Mrs. McLelland, "is the worst legs. I soak 'em in coal oil, an' I rub 'em with turpentine. Pa kin tell you I used up seven bottles of Shinsquinicook Indian Infallible Remedy on 'em, an' they're that stiff and hurtful yet I say to Pa sometimes I wish I was like that cobbler down to Bubble that supports a fambly on one leg—he ain't got two to bother with ef they git feelin' mean like mine does."

Ivera smiled sympathetically. Rob nodded and agreed, "That's so," with much gravity.

"But it wasn't about them legs I come up to see you," their neighbor

proceeded. "I got to thinkin' after you drove off last night that you was the very person that could decide a p'int between Mis' Stebbins an' me. It's a question of etiquette."

"If you'll excuse me," Rob said, rising, "I'll go out to the barn a while. I'm not in it, you know, when it comes to a question of etiquette."

"Oh, g'long!" consented Mrs. McLelland, contemptuously.

The young fellow laughingly took his departure. Mrs. McLelland firmly planted her cane—a sawed off broomstick—and clasped her two big, brown, sinewy, hard-worked old hands on top of it.

"You see my niece was married two weeks ago, an' we give her a oyster weddin'. There was a oyster supper over to the Presbyterian church in Kansas, an' me an' Pa went. We hadn't ett sence noon. Twenty-five cents a supper was charged. I ain't sayin' it was too much seein' Pa demolished three plates of oysters an' I ab-

sorbed four, an' considerin' the pie an' the pickles, which was throwed in, so to speak. All the oysters wasn't used, as I had suspicioned they mightn't be, so I says to Pa: 'You go out to the wagon, Pa, an' you'll find the one-quart can an' the two quart pitcher hid under the Rising Sun quilt. We'll give our niece a oyster wedding.' So out Pa goes an' back he comes with the one-quart can an' the two-quart pitcher. When the lights is bein' put out I goes to a committee woman an' I says, 'What air you goin' to do with them oysters you got left?' Says she, 'I don't hardly know.' Says I to her, 'They air not particular desirable to us, not bein' on the half shell, the way Pa professes the most amenity fur them, but seein' that they're left on your hands, an' that I believe in patronizin' them that labors fur the Lord, I'll take 'em, an' pay you twenty cents a quart fur 'em.' She says, 'Twenty-five at least—they cost us thirty.' But I answers, 'Twenty an' not another cent. My mind

is fixed on that firm ez the tail is set in the cat. We ain't paved with gold,' I says. So we took the superficial beevalves home, an' when Eleolanda was married we *had* a spread. Oyster soup an' vinegar pie, cookies an' cold slaw, and salt-riz biscuits."

She paused to draw breath—a long breath of triumphant retrospection. The girl opposite gazed at her with sparkling eyes.

"That must have been a supper!" she declared with emphasis.

"It was," impressively. "When everything was ready I steps to the door of the other room—we ain't got but two, exceptioning the loft, an' I seen that all the guests was sittin' quiet an' peaceable close to the wall, just as orderly as anything you ever see—an' I says: 'The Reverend Mr. and the Reverend Mrs. McGrew!' Then I calls, 'Mr. an' Mrs. Tobias Fry'—his folks, you know. And then I says: 'Mr. Amos Zinkle an' Miss Amberiller Jones.' Wasn't that right?"

“Right?” echoed Miss Lyle, with a rising inflection that expressed astonishment such a question should be considered necessary. The old lady leaned back in her chair, and laughed with a heartiness that brought the blood warmly into her tan-colored cheeks.

“I knowed you’d think so. I did myself when they come a-walkin’ out to supper, stiff as soldiers, an’ not speakin’ above their breaths. But while they was partakin’ up comes approachin’ me Mrs. Stebbins—the little one with the black eyes an’ the turn-up nose. I furgot you don’t know her, not bein’ in sassiety here yet. She says to me: ‘Mrs. McLelland, that-a-way ain’t customary among the four hundred. The lady receivin’ should not invite the guests to partake. Such is the office of a meenial.’ I says to her, an’ I felt myself a-growin: ‘Mis’ Stebbins, permit me the animosity of counteractin’ your remarks. Mine is the reliable receipt,’ I says, an’ I seen she was a-shrivelin, ‘onless—on-

less,' I says, 'you employ a butler in the fambly.'"

She paused, panting—exhausted, majestic, superior, superb.

Ivera laughed—laughed as she had not for months, for the few years since her childhood ended. Rob, currying the horses, heard the gay, sweet, childish chiming of irrepressible mirth, and smiled.

"There!" shouted Mrs. McLelland, "I knowed it—I knowed it! I told Pa you'd say I was right. You don't need to utter one single consonant." Her catch-innations, following the young laughter, sounded like a grotesque echo. "I was sure you'd agree with me, fur ef I do live in Nebrasky, I ain't always done it. I read the Washington sassiety news every week regular in the inside of the Dry Creek *Chronicle*. I didn't think when it came to knowledge of etiquette that any little snub-nose Stebbins could superannuate me. An' I see you know it, too."

Confronted by the responsibility of

deciding a question of such stupendous social importance, the girl was silent. Her eyes shone and her red lips were mutinously mirthful.

"We ain't got no affinity sence," Mrs. McLelland explained, lifting herself laboriously erect and leaning very hard indeed on the broomstick cane. "Her husband was elected town clerk in Bubble, but I never heerd it. Her 'Court-house Steps' quilt is done, but she ain't got through yet—for all I know. Ef Pa buys out the undertakin' business, an' gits a fine hearse like he talks of, I hope she won't never git to ride in it, *fur she don't deserve it!*"

"I don't really think she does," Miss Lyle agreed seriously.

"To think," appealed Mrs. McLelland, "of a little, flirty thing that ain't never been out of Nebrasky or Kansas a-criterionin' me! M-e! That lived fur two year only a hundred an' twenty mile from Chicago."

"It was a rash thing to do," Miss Lyle assented.

Her visitor shot her a keen glance, but she was smiling seraphically.

"Good-bye. No, don't call Rob Lyle. I can get into that low rig alone. But, look here!" She straightened up and shook one imperious forefinger. "I'm goin' to tell Pa ef any of them Stebbins' hens comes over on our half section, to flop somethin' after 'em, even if it's one of our corn-cobs, though fuel is dear just now, owin' to the railroad strike, though why men can't resign theirselves to the inimitable surpasses me. Even an empty lye-can shied at one of 'em would convey my contumely fur a woman who ain't never lived within one hundred an' twenty mile of Chicago, and don't understand the embonpoint of a question of etiquette."

"Going, Mrs. Mc?" cried Rob, coming in. "I'm off for Bubble, myself. I'll drive you as far as you go."

"I'm not thanking anyone to drive me," returned Mrs. McLelland, stiffly.

"If them legs of mine will let me git in the buggy, I kin git home."

Rob looked toward his sister. "Have you asked her about getting help?"

"No. Do you know where I can get a servant, Mrs. McLelland?"

"A—servant?"

"Yes, Rob thinks I ought to have help, and—"

"Oh, help—yes," the old lady returned briskly. "I thought you said a servant. We ain't got servants in Nebrasky. Sometimes we git help. You g'long, Rob Lyle, 'n' unhitch that pony."

Rob obediently went.

"I think you might be able to git Moll Chourka. Her mother could mind the baby while she went away."

"I believe I would rather have a young girl," Ivera ventured gently "I'm not very old myself and a married woman might be tyrannical, you know."

She smiled deprecatingly. She was beginning to discover that there were

elements to reconcile and prejudices to conciliate in this new and sparsely populated world.

"Oh, she's a young girl. She ain't married."

"But—I thought you said—" She broke off helplessly.

"The baby? Land, yes." Mrs. McLelland laughed. "Oh, she's a young girl all right—jest turned seventeen. She's the one Mark Dudley thrun over."

Miss Lyle's lips opened, but no sound came from them.

"Mark—Dudley?" she said at length.

"Yes, don't know ef you was acquainted with him. Him an' your brother was awful thick. Died a while back. You must have got a chill last night, you're that white. I'm much obliged to you fur settlin' that question of etiquette between me an' Mis' Stebbins. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye," replied Ivera, and she laughed. But this time the laugh had not the sound of a brook in spring-time.

CHAPTER IV.

"Do you hear, Monsieur? A word with you!"

—*All's Well that Ends Well.*

BUBBLE boomed. Its growth was like unto that of the Biblical gourd. There was talk of running a regular passenger coach through. Stone quarries were opened up in the midst of the stubbly cornfields. Powerful horses dragged huge loads of rock to the waiting freight cars. Teams lumbered slowly in over the rough roads, hauling thousands of bushels of corn to the elevator. The drivers sat sideways on the yellow heaps, or slouched along beside the horses. The raw frame buildings multiplied. In the grayness of dawn white-covered wagons loomed like gigantic mushrooms. A second saloon divided honors with the Owl-King. From a third building came the

sociable sound of clicking billiard balls. A rumor that a jail was to be erected and a resident evangelist supported found favor among a few, although these metropolitan possibilities were of the vaguest and most remote character. Changes were continually occurring. One was the formation of a partnership between Jardine and Jennings. Robert Lyle told his sister about it when he came out from town one evening. "They are a queer pair to strike up such a deal," he concluded. "I suppose the truth of the matter is that Jardine needs money for some of his ambitious schemes, and this Jennings has heaps of what the immortal Avon man calls 'trash.' Jennings ought to keep his eyes peeled."

They were in the little kitchen which had taken on a cleanliness and a cozi-ness wonderfully at variance with its appearance on Ivera's first introduction to it. She was setting the table. A big white apron was tied over her gown

of soft crimson. She looked quickly up at her brother.

"Why? Don't you consider Mr. Jardine honorable?"

"Honorable? Oh, Lord, yes. One couldn't use the other word to him. But he knows what is going to benefit Jack Jardine every time, and he generally gets it."

"I understood you were a friend of his, you and—"

"And Mark? Yes, we hung together pretty closely until—oh, well it's of no consequence now. Supper almost ready, dear?"

"Almost—I think it's of some consequence. Tell me, Rob."

"Oh, it was after Mark and I took Prior into the grain business. They got down on Jardine. They were younger, of course, and he was a bit high and mighty, they thought. I rather sided with them, I admit. That quail smells tempting."

"There was a quarrel, then?"

She asked the question without turn-

ing from the stove, where she was putting the plump brown birds on a little platter. He laughed shortly as he hung his hat on a nail behind the door.

"A quarrel? Oh, no. What put that in your head? There was a difference of opinion—nothing more."

"But it destroyed your pleasant friendship."

"That is rather an extravagant way of putting it, dear. Prior and I are very good comrades yet. Jardine and I speak when we meet. I don't go out of the way to meet him, though."

"Merely that?" Her dark brows went up slightly. "I presumed on your intimacy then, when I permitted him to drive me out."

Robert's fair, boyish face flushed. He laughed silently until he choked over his quail.

"Oh, I say, I wouldn't bother about that," he advised from behind his napkin. "I've no doubt he insisted on bringing you. He's an intrusive devil sometimes. He has come here when

he wasn't asked—or wanted," concluded Rob, recollecting how cold it was at the bottom of the rain-barrel.

"And been—disagreeable?"

Young Lyle choked again. He rose hastily and went to the pail for a drink.

"Well, he has acted in a way to make a fellow chilly—downright shivery—that's the only word to describe his conduct, on my honor. You take quite an interest in Jardine, I've."

"Yes—I do. May I give you more tea?"

"No more, thanks. Why are you interested? He isn't accounted much of a lady's man out here."

"A lady's man—out here?"

He laughed at the scornful significance of her tone.

"Well, he'd hardly be anywhere," Rob continued, in the arrogance of his youth. "He isn't young, you know. He's thirty-six if he's a day. He isn't attractive—at least I can't fancy how he could be considered so with those confoundedly indifferent manners of

his. It may be only that he's exclusive. We resent exclusiveness on the plains. He's reckless. We admire that. But whether we resent or admire makes no earthly difference to Jack Jardine."

"You have identified yourself with the people out here, Rob."

"Necessarily," he returned, dryly.

"And Mr. Jardine has not?"

"Not socially."

"Socially!" she repeated. "Rob, dear! Socially!"

"Oh, indeed, we have society out here. It's rather mixed, of course, and unconventional, and all that sort of thing, but it exists. We have dances, and literaries and box parties, and—"

"Oyster weddings," she supplemented.

"No. In that case Mrs. McLelland carried off the palm of originality. The scarcity of oysters precludes the possibility of oyster weddings becoming vulgarly common."

"Well, what is a box party?"

"You benighted little soul! I was

at a box party a few nights before you came. It is all charmingly simple. You go to a gathering, and you buy a number. A box, containing a luncheon, goes with the number. The girl who prepared the luncheon goes with the box. One eats the supper with the girl, and talks with the girl, and dances with the girl, and sees the girl home—all for a paltry fifty cents. Cheap, is it not?"

"That," Miss Lyle replied, pushing aside her cup and looking over at him, "would depend upon the box and the girl."

"It does, rather." He felt relieved to be rid of the subject of Jack Jardine, and plunged into illustration. "The night I speak of, for instance, the box I drew contained saleratus cookies, huge cucumber pickles artistically attired in green tissue paper, and apples that had seen more youthful days. At least a stretch of the imagination makes it possible to suppose so. The girl also had been

younger once. She wore a thin white dress and red woolen stockings. She wouldn't dance and she couldn't talk. But she ate. She ate all the saleratus cookies, and all the huge cucumber pickles, and all the apples that had seen more youthful days. She may have eaten the green tissue paper, too; I'm not sure. I'm only sure I saw her home."

"You poor—poor boy!"

"Oh, that wasn't the worst of it. She circulated the story that I had kissed her good-night."

"Rob! You didn't?"

"Didn't I?" laughing at her tone of horror. "Would you doubt the declaration of your rural sister? Listen! Who is that?"

A decided step was coming around the house. A moment later vigorous knuckles resounded on the back door. Rob rose and opened it. Jardine stood outside.

"Oh, it's you, Jack. Come in."

"No, I won't go in. I stopped to

tell you that devil of a Prior has all but burned down the office and elevator with some of his everlasting experiments. The fire in the elevator was extinguished before any real harm was done. The office isn't much more than a stack of black sticks. I hope you're fixed about insurance."

"There's not much on the elevator. It's a good thing that didn't go. The office don't count. Did they get the books out?"

"The books were saved."

"Thanks for taking the trouble to let me know."

"I was passing this way," returned Jardine ungraciously. "I'm going out to Auger's about some steers. Mark's trunk was in the office, you recollect. I had it taken over to the hotel. It's in the sample room. It will hardly do to leave it there. I thought there might be something in it of value to Miss Lyle. You'd better see about it in the morning."

"I'll go right in now and see about having it brought out in the morning."

"There's no need for such haste. Anyhow you can't leave your sister alone."

"I don't mind staying alone," said Ivera Lyle. She had come to the door and was standing beside her brother, her head and the round curve of her shoulder silhouetted against the mellow lamplight. There was an embarrassed silence. Then Ivera asked: "Will you come in, Mr. Jardine? I should like to speak with you." Looking quickly from her brother to the man standing hat in hand at the doorstep she was reminded that Jardine was not a young man, and recalled what Robert had said about him.

"With pleasure," answered Jardine. He followed them into the kitchen. Rob, impotently rebellious concerning the situation, and uneasy as to the subject of his sister's proposed interview with Jardine, found himself crowded out of her confidence.

"Take my horse to save saddling, Rob," Jardine said, "but no whip, mind!"

"I know your brute too well for that." He pulled on his hat, went out into the frosty dusk of the young winter night, mounted Jardine's horse, and loped away toward Bubble. Stars were straggling out in a half-hearted fashion. A wind that alternately stung and caressed was blowing down from the Dakotas. The prairies on either side of the road stretched away dimly visible, ghostly, illimitable.

Rob rode recklessly. Ivera's interest in Jardine perplexed him. He wished he had not been so eager about the trunk. It was pretty nearly as safe in the hotel as it had been in the office. A night more or less would not have mattered. A troublesome suggestion insinuated itself that there might be a stronger reason than any he knew of for his sister's Western visit. He remembered that only once had she mentioned the name of her

lost lover. That was the morning after her arrival. She had spoken enigmatically then. It was quite impossible she could have any suspicion as to the real state of affairs. But if any lurking idea of the truth possessed her! Jardine, to be sure, was no blab, but there was no telling what a girl like Ivera might not get out of a fellow.

"Damn it all!" he groaned. "I wish I'd never started. I wish I was back. Get up, there, will you?"

He had no whip, but he brought his boot heel down viciously on the animal's flank. The horse seemed to spring in air. Then it dashed down the cut in the side of the bluff up which the buggy had careened with Jardine and his sister the night of her arrival. A swerve to the right, as the whiteness of the quarried stone gleamed out pallidly in the half light—a scramble—a struggle on the very edge, then horse and rider crashed over into the draw below.

CHAPTER V.

"She takes upon her bravely at first dash!"

—*Henry VI.*

IVERA LYLE stood at the supper table and washed up the dishes and Jack Jardine sat and watched her with the amused consciousness that under other circumstances he might find the situation pleasant, and possibly romantic.

"You have had supper?" she had questioned.

"I have had supper. It consisted of fried pork, with a good deal of flour boiled in the fat by way of gravy. This was supplemented by a leathery delicacy my man calls corn bread. It is our invariable repast."

"Won't he cook anything else?"

"He can't."

There was a silence. Then she said:
"This is a desolate country."

"Are you finding that out already?"

"Already? I've been here over two weeks. I've driven around with Rob. I've been in the farmhouses and talked with the women. Such isolation! Such monotony! Such drudgery! And the hopelessness of ever escaping from these conditions accentuates the horror of them. One exceptionally intelligent woman I met asked me if I had read Kipling's story of the ride of Morrowbie Jukes, and the experience of those endeavoring to escape from the plague pit. 'We are like that here,' she said. 'When those accursed creatures tried to scale the walls that bounded their living grave, the sand sifted down on them, destroying their foothold. We try to escape, and there is the drouth one year out of three, sometimes oftener. In the odd years of prosperity the price of grain goes down, until the most a man makes after all goes but a short way toward paying the indebtedness incurred dur-

ing the years his land yielded him nothing.”

“There’s some truth in that,” Jardine said, thoughtfully. “If a man has sufficient capital to permit him to hedge he’s apt to succeed. For instance, if he can buy corn cheap a good year, and hold it until a season of drouth, when stock are starving, he can buy feed, and ship cattle, and reap big returns.”

“Oh, the capitalist—yes. But for the farmer who depends upon the benignity of the skies from one season to another—what lies before him?”

“That depends largely upon his temperament, and upon the ability of his family to adapt itself to existing conditions.”

“You are evasive. Putting his possibly sanguine temperament and the preference of his family for bread without butter out of the question—what then?”

“Then it is a case of slow starvation.”

"Of mental malady also?"

"It's naturally conducive to that."

"I fancy that Nebraskans twenty years from now will not feel the depression their parents experience to-day. They will have been familiar with life here and all its hard conditions. They will accept it as a matter of course, and make the best of it. But the people one finds on these prairies to-day, the middle-aged and the prematurely old, have come from less desolate states. Their one dream and longing is to go back East sometime. But this delight presupposes prosperity. It grows fainter as the years pass. There is the everlasting drouth to be confronted."

"Oh, sometimes we have rain—the night you came out here, for instance." She refused to reply to his rallying tone.

"For the men it does not seem to be so bad," she went on. "They have their larger interests, their trips with stock, their lodge meetings, and local

elections. But the women! I wonder they don't go mad!"

"Some of them do—the less stolid."

"I should," she said, and shuddered.

He looked at her intently. "I don't think so. You have preferences, tastes, resources within yourself of which peasant women have no consciousness or inkling."

"How can they have such consciousness? To appreciate beauty one must first have leisure. That is the best thing about wealth—it gives one leisure. And having leisure one can enjoy all that is most beautiful in book or on canvas, on land or sea."

"You would live your own life anywhere," he insisted.

She shook her head. "I'd try to, but I think something would snap in me. I walked down the other morning to the house where the man who works for Rob lives with his family. Such a morning! The prairies were white with frost, and every tall cottonwood was a shaft of silver! A glorious sun was

coming up, and there was a rushing wind that one bent to buffet—a wind that had the cold resistance of ocean waves. I went from it all into the little, two-roomed hut. Some men and children were eating at the table, and the woman stood by the stove frying pork and cakes. I could only see her dimly through the greasy fog with which the place was filled. I remarked upon the beauty of the morning. ‘Is it a pretty day?’ she asked indifferently. When the men had left the room she told me they had gone out to kill a hog. ‘It weighs four hundred,’ she said, with some pride, ‘an’ I’m goin’ to put it down.’ ‘Without help?’ ‘Land yes, I kin do it all right if only the baby don’t fret.’ I looked at the puny child in the cradle. ‘He looks delicate,’ I said. ‘Don’t you ever take him out?’ ‘No,’ she replied, ‘I ain’t got time for that. I ain’t been anywheres myself since the last Fourth. All the children looks that way until they get old enough to roll outdoors themselves. Then

they pick up.' What beauty could that woman see or hear, or even think of, with such a task before her? And when she might creep to bed, tingling with tired, there was still the fretful baby to tend."

"Her case is a common one," Jardine admitted. "One day or one week or even one month might not be so unendurable, but it is the repetition that is so terrible. Three hundred and sixty-five days in the year, and God only knows how many years ahead of them. It's rough lines."

"I wish I could induce Rob to throw up the life out here and go back with me. He is altering—invariably, I suppose. I was much startled at first by the change in him. He does not realize it himself. He had fine ideals and ambitions—once."

"Fine ideals are torn in tatters by the wind of the plains," returned Jardine, "and ambitions that are not merely material rust." She took up the lamp and led the way into the

front room. Jardine, following her, uttered an exclamation of pleased surprise. Was this the dismal apartment in which he had found Lyle asleep? This gay little room with the cheery fire, some comfortable new chairs, a lot of pencil and pastel sketches pinned on the wall, magazines tossed around, and a wicker sewing stand full of bright wools and stuffs?

"You are a magician," he declared. "How long is Rob going to keep you to make the rest of us envious?"

She put the lamp down and turned and faced him. "Only until I have discovered what I came to learn—the manner and mystery of Mark Dudley's death."

"Miss Lyle!"

She was looking at him quietly—expectantly.

"Why do you imagine there is any mystery connected with it?"

"You may laugh at me if I tell you."

Laugh! There was slight chance of his jesting on that subject!

"I will not," he answered. He waited until she sat down, then took the chair opposite her. "Miss Lyle, what is it you believe?"

"I believe that Mark Dudley did not die a natural death."

He caught his breath sharply. His lips tightened into a pale line. There was an instant's pause. Then he commanded: "Go on!"

"I was only seventeen when Mark and I became engaged. Soon after he decided to go West. He refused to allow me to accompany him until he could offer me a comfortable home. 'But,' I urged, 'if you should become ill—be near death?' 'Neither danger nor death can keep me from calling to you,' he said. 'If I am in peril my spirit shall summon yours; and yours shall hear!' It was all very real to me. I promised to listen—and obey."

Jardine's eyes—deep eyes with a tired look—never left her face.

"That was five years ago. I had

almost forgotten our compact. On the night of the first of September—I dreamed, you will say. This I saw: a room in which there was a stove, a counter, some chairs, a lounge. On this lounge lay a dead man. The man was Mark Dudley.”

Jardine sprang to his feet. “For God’s sake!” he exclaimed, and broke off.

“I looked at my watch—I had awakened with the horror of the impression. It was half past eleven. I again tried to sleep. After a while the same queer sense of semi-consciousness possessed me. I saw once more the dimly-lit room. The rigid shape was still on the lounge. A sparely-built man in the rear, whose face I could not see, was stooping over some task—apparently a task of importance. The door opened. You came in.”

Jardine fell a step backward—flung out his hand.

“I told you when we first met that I recognized you,” she proceeded, look-

ing at him. "Now you know how. Why you were in that place at that hour I do not know, but just then it seemed to me that Mark cried out,—although neither you nor the other man appeared to hear, 'Ivera! Help me!' Shaking I leaped out of bed. It was half-past three. Several days later your telegram that Mark had died at half-past eleven o'clock on the night of the first of September reached me. Mr. Jardine, will you tell me what occurred at half-past three o'clock the following morning?"

White as he would be coffined, Jardine regarded her.

"Have I startled you?" she asked.

"I do not wonder"—his voice sounded changed—"that you were alarmed by such a—a dream. If there were any proofs that your suspicions should be considered, I would be glad to assist you."

"Yes?" In her voice was that faintly interrogative note that always disturbed him.

"To confute your conviction," he continued coldly, "would be an easier task than to confirm it."

"Mark died the night of the first of September. He was buried on the second. Was such haste imperative?"

"Eldridge had declared the disease contagious. Burials follow death more quickly here than in the East."

A faint smile flickered over her face. She looked suddenly white and weary.

"You refuse to help me then?"

"Miss Lyle," he cried passionately, "why do you ask me such questions? Why do you look at me like that?"

"Because it was your face I saw in my vision that night."

"And you harbor suspicions toward me because I happen to resemble the creature of a dream?"

"I did not say I suspected you."

"But you do."

"I must learn the truth," she evaded, piteously.

"God help you when you do!" Jack Jardine said to himself.

"Sit down!" the girl suddenly urged with gracious cordiality. "What a hostess you will think me!"

But Jardine had flung back his head and was listening.

"Someone is calling from the road," he said. "I shall see who it is."

He hurried out the front way. In a few minutes he was back. "It is Doctor Eldridge and Rob. It isn't anything serious, I think, but Rob is hurt."

"Hurt?"

"They say my horse shied at the quarry, and went over with Rob into the draw. Eldridge was coming up the ascent at the time, and saw the accident. He secured help, and got Rob into his buggy. We will bring him in now."

When they carried Rob in, he looked anxiously at his sister. "I'm one big ache, I've, but it won't amount to much. Don't get scared."

She shook her head and smiled back at him.

Jardine murmured a word of introduction as Ivera glanced at Doctor Eldridge. She saw a middle-aged man with a peculiarly pale and flabby face, straight black hair and round black eyes, in which the iris was almost completely absorbed by the pupil.

"He is badly bruised and shaken up," Eldridge decided after an examination, "but there are no bones broken. He'll be around all right in a week or so. He was more frightened than hurt, as we say of the children. Still, it was a close shave. Good thing the horse didn't fall on him. I'll call to-morrow."

He bowed to Ivera and went out. Jardine followed him.

"See here, Doc," he said, "that girl is alone there. The woman who has been helping her comes only for a few hours in the daytime, I understand. You know the people out here better than I do. Can't you find someone to-night to come to stay with Miss Lyle? Where are you off to, anyhow?"

"I'm going to old man Dayson's. He's in the last ditch with pneumonia. Yes, I think I know a girl who'll come down. I'll send someone, sure."

"Right away, Doc, mind!"

"Right away. I pass the place."

He drove off. Jardine went back to the house. He told Ivera the doctor would send a woman to stay with her. Then he talked a while with Rob. He was not long gone when there was a knock at the kitchen door. Ivera opened it. A girl stood just outside. She had a small shawl over her head. This shawl she grasped under her chin with a square, brown hand.

"The Doc he says you want help," she said, speaking with the hesitancy of one using an unaccustomed tongue.

"Yes. Come in."

In the light Ivera noticed that the girl was young and comely in a robust, peasant style. Her form was full and round. Her face had the soft curves, and pouting lips of childhood. The eyes were too prominent—too heavy-

lidded. The lips were sensuous. But the dark hair was abundant and the cheeks were deeply and peachily pink.

"What is your name?" Miss Lyle asked.

"Mollie Chourka."

Involuntarily Miss Lyle moved back. What was that Mrs. McLelland had said?—"the girl Mark Dudley thrun over."

CHAPTER VI.

"A fine volley of words, gentlemen, and quickly shot off!"

—*Two Gentlemen of Verona.*

JARDINE walked back to town. Late though it was, there were many people moving. They stood in groups around the damaged elevator and the ruins of the office. Eldridge had returned, and had told of the accident to Robert Lyle. The rumor grew, until it was asserted he had been killed outright. In the glare of the light from the drugstore Jardine saw the broad, red face of Peter Jennings.

"Where's Prior?"

"Haven't seen him. Where have you been?"

"Out at Lyle's," Jack replied shortly.

"Oh," exclaimed Peter, with a significant smirk, "to see Mr. Lyle, of course."

"It is," Jack assured him with much deliberation, "none of your damned business who I went to see." And he walked on. He went into the hotel, strode up the rickety stairway and kicked open the door of a certain room. On the side of the bed Prior sat smoking. A trunk stood in the middle of the floor. The leather strap that encircled it was undone, but the lock was still secure.

"You've been trying to open that trunk," said Jardine.

"For once," returned Prior placidly, "you've guessed right, my unceremonious friend. You were so almighty anxious to save it I thought it might contain something worth seeing, so I had it brought up to my room. Not one of my keys will fit it though."

"You have no right to open it."

"Have you?"

"No."

"You were pretty careful that trunk should not go up in smoke. Dudley used to tell us he had no relatives.

Who has the right to open it, then?"

A dull red flushed Jardine's handsome face.

"Lyle has the best right, I fancy. His sister was affianced to Dudley. Doubtless her letters, keepsakes and things of that sort are in the trunk. We know he had her picture. She may wish to secure these without having them pass through your hands—or mine."

"Oh, if that is all," Prior responded indifferently, "I've no interest in it."

"You're going to rebuild the office I suppose," Jardine said, as he knelt down and buckled the trunk strap.

"Of course. I haven't seen Rob yet."

"You won't in a hurry unless you go to see him. He got a tumble to-night that will lay him up for a few days. By the way, have you any idea why his sister came out from civilization?"

"The pretty little girl with the de-

licious old Irish name? How do the lines go?

"How oft when the summer sun rested on
Clara,
And lit the dark heath on the hills of Ivera,
Have I sought thee—"

"Stop that," Jardine ordered gruffly.
"Have you any idea why she came to Nebraska—to this beggarly little town?"

"It can't concern me to know."

Jardine, one foot planted on the trunk, looked at him keenly. "I should say it concerned you a good deal."

"How?"

"She has come here to discover the circumstances and particulars of Mark's illness and death."

Prior looked startled. Then he grinned, showing all his little sharp, white teeth.

"That's a good deal better than attempting to discover the particulars

of his health and life. She would not relish those."

Jardine impatiently pushed his old hat back on his head. "But she says she does not believe Mark Dudley died a natural death."

"Good Lord," gasped Prior. Stunned into sudden seriousness, he sat bolt upright and stared at Jardine.

"I knew it was a bad business," Jardine asserted gloomily. There was silence in the room. They could hear the grunting of a freight train down on the track.

"What put that idea in her head?" Prior asked.

Jardine checked himself as he was about to reply. A minute later he said: "That isn't the question. The idea is there. And she doesn't strike me as the kind of a girl to be easily discouraged."

Prior, his sallow little face singularly disturbed, sat and drummed with his fingers on the washstand. Jardine, in his former position, stared moodily at

the lamp, in which the flame was licking the chimney black in an attempt to efface its feeble existence.

"I've a good mind," burst out Prior, "to divvy up with Rob as soon as that insurance is paid, and go South for my health."

Jardine ground an oath between his teeth. "You mean to take that blood money, then?"

"Why not? There was risk enough about getting it."

"I bet Lyle won't touch it. He's a foolish youngster, but he's not a thorough scoundrel."

"All the better for me if he won't. The policy is made out payable to me. But I fancy he'll take his share. You look as if you'd like to lick me, Jardine."

Jardine glanced down at his hands, long, brown, slender hands, which labor had not robbed of their shapeliness. He struck the tips together with a light, dusting gesture.

"Oh," commented Prior, with a sneer-

ing laugh, "you wouldn't soil your hands, eh? You'd consider kicking about right, eh?"

"Perhaps," Jardine returned gently, "but you see I can't put in my time kicking curs." With which amiable remark he walked out of the room, out of the house, and toward the livery barn, to which a farmer had taken his horse. When he reached home the bleak dawn was not far off. He dropped from the animal he had hired, stabled it, and turned in the direction of his shack.

He felt tired, harassed, perplexed. To speak—or to keep still? To make bad worse—or let bad enough alone? To tell Ivera Lyle the truth and have her hate the memory of her lover, scorn her brother, perhaps despise him? No. There was only one thing to do—be silent. A loud snore greeted him as he opened his door. The snore proceeded from an individual prone on a carpet-covered lounge beside a little sheet-iron stove. The form was cov-

ered with a horse blanket. At one end of the blanket a rosy image beamed benignly. From under the other end protruded a pair of substantial feet, wearing the most brilliant hose imaginable. The air was rank with the smell of stale kerosene.

Jennings lifted his head. "That you, dear boy? Thought I'd not go on to my own place to-night but would bunk with you. I've been dreaming of that pretty sister of Lyle's. I've a good mind to cut you out. I believe I'll go call on her, and ask to take her to the Christmas dance, and—oh, by Jove, now."

He dodged, as the heavy boot Jardine had taken off whizzed by his head. Of the many people who knew Jack Jardine, two that night entertained the conviction that he was not the sweetest tempered fellow in the world.

CHAPTER VII.

"But you'll be secret?"

—*Hamlet.*

"**W**HY, it's Mrs. McLelland!" cried Ivera.

She had hastened to open the front door in answer to a loud and imperious summons. Mrs. McLelland, massively handsome, wonderfully preserved, impressively dignified, and subtly sympathetic, confronted her; Mrs. McLelland in black and shiny alpaca, in stiffly starched net fichu, in an ancient Paisley shawl, in the greenest and thickest of kid gloves, in all the dazzling brilliance of gold-rimmed spectacles and brand new teeth!

"Yes, I come out reel early, though we ain't near settled in the new house yet. I felt it my duty to come. I didn't know but you'd be sleepin'.

City folks is such to keep a-layin' after sun-up. Where've you got him?"

"Come in. Got whom?"

"Rob Lyle, of course."

"He's in the front bedroom."

Ivera led the way into the little parlor. Mrs. McLelland followed her. She deposited her ponderous proportions on a pine rocker that creaked protestingly, and folded her fat green hands in her lap. "Well," she commented, her shrewd old eyes scanning the girl closely, "you're takin' it awful easy."

Ivera smiled sunnily.

"It might have been worse," she said.

Mrs. McLelland smiled, too, but with a certain subdued resignation, a conventional solemnity.

"That's so. It might have been lots worse ef Pa didn't buy out the undertakin' business when he did."

Miss Lyle looked rather astonished. "I don't quite understand," she said; "what has that to do with it?"

Mrs. McLelland shook her head compassionately. "You don't? Why, land, that other man, Mahasby, his name was—Pa's progenitor, you know, in Bubble—was no more of a hand fur corpses than my old cat Susanna. He didn't have no hearse ever—only a spring wagon. An' fur all one could tell he might be a-cartin' a pagan or a quarter of beef, instead of a respectable corpse that paid his fare. Now Pa, he's got a hearse, with glass sides, an' embalmin' fluid, and linin's, of every shade from white to cream, to suit blondes or brunettes. Which shade do you ameliorate? But most like you an' Pa has talked all that over this mornin'."

"Why, I haven't seen Mr. McLelland since you moved to town."

"What? Wasn't he out here 'bout three o'clock?"

"No, indeed."

"Where was he then?" Mrs. McLelland demanded, sitting bolt upright.

"I'm sure," protested Ivera in meek-

ness and bewilderment, "I don't know."

"He got a call fur west of town between two an' three o'clock. I heered the man tell him 'twas west. There weren't anyone sick out here I knowed on but old man Dayson."

"Mr. Dayson is dead."

"Oh, mebbe 'twas him, then. I expect they sent fur Pa to constitoot proper appearances fur him. I ain't seen Pa since. But what about Rob? You ain't never sent to the undertaker over in Kansas to tend upon him?"

"The undertaker!" gasped Ivera.

"Yes. You don't mean to tell me you shet Pa out'n the job?"

"What job?" Miss Lyle faltered weakly.

Mrs. McLelland looked her wrath and indignation. "Buryin' Rob Lyle, of course! An' Pa a beautiful hand fur—what's that?"

That was a gay shout of laughter from the bedroom.

"Oh, Mrs. Mc— Mrs. Mc! I'm worth ten dead men yet!"

In majestic disappointment the caller arose and made her ponderous way to the door of the bedroom. "Then you ain't dead, Rob Lyle?"

"Not yet," returned Rob apologetically.

"Well, I, never! They had it in Bubble last night that you got throwed from that Englishman's horse, an' was killed. So when the man roused Pa out o' bed, I made sure 'twas to wait on you. So you couldn't set on a horse without bein' propelled off? Was you drunk again, Rob Lyle?"

"Oh, no!" cried Ivera, in a shocked voice.

"Of course not!" cried Rob indignantly. He shook his head with a vigor, but when his sister had turned her back he winked at Mrs. McLelland.

"Well," averred their visitor, "I must be gittin' back. Ef Pa has old man Dayson on his hands he'll want a good dinner. Fixin' dead folks allus

does give Pa such an appetite. You see he don't piece."

"Piece?" Miss Lyle repeated interrogatively.

"Yes. Now, my niece she pieces on cold corn bread an' apples. I piece on raw onions an' crackers mostly, but Pa he don't piece at all, so he gets real sharpened in his stomach when it comes mealtimes. Well, good-bye."

Outside the house she encountered a buxom damsel whose cheeks were pink and whose expression was sullen.

"So you're here, Moll Chourka! What doin'? Workin'? When'd you come?"

"Last night."

"I thought Mis' Douthett was helpin' here days."

"She was, but she ain't," the Bohemian replied. "Lady want help all the time."

Mrs. McLelland got herself into her buggy with some difficulty, and drove back to Bubble. Jardine was passing when she drew up before her new frame

cottage. He came forward, and held the reins while she alighted, giving her a steady hand by way of assistance at the same time. She grunted in acknowledgment, and remarked that she had been out to Lyle's.

"How is Rob getting on?"

"Rob!" she gave a contemptuous sniff. "Naught was never in danger, an' it ain't now. But I expect he'll run the legs off'n that young sister of his'n an' Moll Chourka a-waiting on him. He's the kind that's willin' to let folks to do fur him."

"Mollie Chourka? That Bohemian girl? Is she there?"

"She come there to work last night."

"The devil she did! I beg your pardon, Mrs. McLelland. I must be off."

He doffed his hat and strode down the main street until he came to a little ten by twelve shanty. He banged into the one bare and dirty room. There were a couple of chairs and some scattered books in the room. On an up-

turned cracker box was a dirty tin basin, a bar of soap, and a dingy towel. Under the stove was an inch of ashes, and the reddish-brown fluff of corn cobs covered the floor. Doctor Eldridge, dozing in a chair, started up as his visitor entered.

"Oh, it's only you, Jack. Sit down."

"What in thunder did you mean," Jardine demanded furiously, "by getting that Chourka girl to go to Lyle's? You knew better."

"Why shouldn't she go there?"

"She? Don't you know Miss Lyle was to have married Mark Dudley."

"I wasn't aware of that."

"You were told, but you've forgotten," Jardine insisted. "You've forgotten more than that, thanks to that demon drug you use." He was white with anger.

"Go easy, Jack!"

But Jardine, uttering very fervently the request that the physician betake himself to a warmer climate than that of Southern Nebraska, went off, slam-

ming the door after him. He made resentful haste with the grind of affairs demanding his attention, but several matters cropped up to annoy and delay him. The crisp, gray winter evening was closing in before he found himself riding rapidly west in the direction of the Lyle farm. It was still light enough to see the road dipping and winding before him, the blackish clumps of sumac by the roadside, the wine-red masses of tangleweed that clung to his horse's legs.

He found Rob sitting up in bed, eating a far daintier supper than the mild character of his illness made really necessary. Ivera was waiting on him. She gave Jardine a distant little bow and disappeared. She went into her own small room, directly back of Rob's, and sat down by the window. She felt very tired. The unaccustomed work fatigued her. She would wait until Mr. Jardine was gone. So she sat in a tired trance, waiting to hear the closing of the front door. She did not

hear it. She never knew if she had slept. But she presently became aware that someone was speaking in a low and cautious voice just outside her window.

"Remember what I've told you," instructed Jack Jardine. "Don't let her know anything about it. You must take care that she never discovers the truth. She is not likely to do so if you only keep still."

"I don't care," muttered Mollie Chourka, sulkily.

"I care—a lot. And I'm determined she shall not find out. You will keep silent, Mollie?" His tone all at once had become gentle, almost pleading.

"What good it do me to keep still?" asked Mollie in her broken fashion.

"This much good." There was the chink of silver as it passed from his hand to hers. "There is more where it came from, Mollie, if you never admit the truth to Miss Lyle."

"All right. I won't." She was jingling the money.

“Good girl!” said Jardine in a relieved voice. He plowed along by the side of the house, and his footsteps were lost in the withered grass of the prairies.

CHAPTER VIII.

"Please you, draw near. Louder the music, there!"

—*King Lear.*

CHRISTMAS EVE. Not the Christmas Eve of a great city. Not a Christmas Eve that meant crowded streets, and brilliant stores, and gushes of warmth from open doors, and tempting odors, and laden pedestrians, and heaps of holly on the sidewalk, and roses in the florist's window, and whirling vehicles, and whiffs of fragrance, and clanging bells, and bursts of music, and glittering trees, and smiling faces, and the possibility of all delightful things to see and to have, of all delicious things to taste. Not that kind of a Christmas Eve. But a Christmas Eve out in a little, new, crude, sprawling, ugly Western town, where people, stolid, reckless, contemptuous, stupid,

met and mingled without assimilating, without a vestige of real heartiness or good-fellowship; a Christmas Eve that to the many suggested merely a dinner of unusual proportion and excellence, and to the few brought reminiscences that could only be flushed from the memory by copious drafts of liquor; a Christmas Eve on which the supper served in the meeting-house was the acme of social exhilaration for the righteous, and the turkey raffle in the saloon the chief diversion of the ungodly.

It was a typical Nebraska winter day, with a pale, splendid, distant sky, into which went melting vast stretches of interminable prairie. A howling wind swept the dust up from the drab roads in thick and swirling drab clouds.

Ivera Lyle, setting her small house in order, and with Mollie's help preparing extra dishes for the morrow, recalled, as she glanced out, the scene upon which she had looked the previous Christmas Eve—Michigan av-

enue, stretching away, snow-mantled and palace-lined; the speeding sleighs, the tossing plumes, the jingling bells; the mounted police in their picturesque uniforms; the electric lights flashing out in diminishing perspectives of white flame; she had looked out upon it all as she stood by the window reading Mark's letter. "Before another Christmas dawns I shall have come for you," he had written. And now it was another Christmas, and she had come to the West, not as his happy bride, but an anxious woman, bent on the queerest quest that ever sprang from a slight and supernatural source. She had invested Mark with a fine spirit of sacrifice because of his refusal to claim her until he could offer her a suitable home. The thought that he was working for her in a strange place, among strange people, appealed to her affection, and kept it steadfast. She gave him admiration and honor for the moral heroism with which she herself had endowed him. The belated news

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of his death had been a terrible shock to her.

"Ivera! Help me!" How her heart had thrilled with pain and pity in response to that despairing entreaty.

"I will help you, my dearest!" she made answer over and over. "I cannot bring you back, but I shall learn why your soul sent to mine that strange supplication." Only once had her devotion been shaken. That was when Mrs. McLelland had spoken of Mollie Chourka, but after the appeal for silence she had heard Jardine make to the girl, all doubt of Mark's fidelity had vanished, and the distrust with which she had regarded Jardine from the first increased.

"A dollar for your thoughts, dear," cried Rob. He was dressed and sitting in the little parlor, playing with grace the role of convalescent.

"They're not worth a dollar, Rob."

"Then you are thinking of the coming festivity. What a flirt you are, Ive! To go to a Christmas dance in



Bubble with that monstrous little man!"

"Who persuaded me to agree to go?" flashed Ivera. "You said I need not dance. You said it would be fun to look on. You talked me into it, Rob. Besides—"

She left the sentence unfinished. There was no reason she should tell him she hoped to meet Prior or Eldridge there—perhaps both. A few days previous Jennings, adopting the custom sanctioned on the plains, which permits any young man to call on any young woman, had donned his most striking equestrian costume and ridden out to the Lyle farmhouse. Being duly presented by Robert, who had met him in town, he had besought Ivera to accompany him to the event of the season, the Christmas dance to be given in Bubble.

"Go, Ive!" Robert had urged. "It's deadly dull here."

"But I don't dance."

"Neither do I," cried Peter Jennings, cordially.

The consideration that there she might find an opportunity for speech with one of the men she wished to meet influenced the girl. She consented to go. Mollie was to be away for Christmas. Rob said, laughingly, he was glad to be rid of women folks for a while, and enjoy the freedom of his former condition.

Jennings drove up a little after eight o'clock. He was resplendent in the glossiest of broadcloth, the most glistening of linen, the whitest of ties, and the yellowest of gloves. His broad face was rosier than ever. His little eyes twinkled merrily. His square, white teeth showed in a dazzling smile. Rob looked him over critically.

"I say, Jennings," he questioned irreverently, "where did you get the togs?"

"In London, dear boy. I couldn't wear the beastly things one gets at this side of the water, you know."



"I know," said Rob. He heaved a sigh, which Jennings divined to be one of deep and bitter envy. Then he looked at Ivera, who was all in soft furs and silk that was the shade of a Jacqueminot. "You two," he went on solemnly, "will simply paralyze the people."

"Poor people!" laughed the girl, as she lightly leant and kissed him good-bye.

The ball was held in the Grand Opera House. This particular place of entertainment was a long, bare, roughly-plastered room, situated over a general store. It was approached by a flight of stairs that were steep, narrow, and very dirty. It was lighted by flaring oil lamps under tin shades. Boards, each supported by a chair at either end, were ranged around the wall for the accommodation of those who were not dancing. At one end of the room were barrels. On the barrels were planks. On the planks were set two chairs. These chairs were oc-

cupied by men with fiddles. A third man, pink-shirted, collarless and having smooth hair, plastered in careful curves on his temples, stood behind the orchestra, and "prompted" in stentorian tones. The place was well filled when Ivera and Jennings entered. A vigorous dance was in progress. All of the women were bareheaded. Some of the men wore hats. The dancers swung, advanced, "chasseyed" and retreated with much sprightliness and energy. Elderly men and women actively participated in the terpsichorean proceedings. The youth and beauty of the town and the surrounding territory were out in full force; the youth awkward and radiant in the unwonted novelty of white shirt and collar, the beauty brilliant in the most blasphemous of hues, maddeningly modest in the briefest of skirts.

"Ladies in the center and seven hands round!" yelled the prompter, dimly visible through the fog of dust beaten up by the pounding shoes.

"Balance to your partner—Hi, there you, Saul Cotter, I'm talkin' to you! You ain't doin' that figger right. You're balancin' to corner 'stead of to your partner. Tell that girl in the yellah dress she got wrong last time. Now, boys, whoop her up! Try it again! So!" Then the music blared out, the dancers intermingled, and the dust again arose, an irritating incense to pleasure.

"Queer crowd," Jennings said to Ivera.

She nodded absently. She did not notice how many furtive glances were cast in her direction, nor dream that many of the feminine dancers present would later copy her city clothes in the cheapest of materials. She was observing how little the middle-aged women had sought to render themselves attractive. Their gowns were ill-fitting; their hair was twisted into a tight knot at the back of the head; they seldom smiled, and they moved stiffly as if performing a solemn duty.

The surplus vitality of the men displayed itself in impromptu jigs and much swaggering.

"Oh," she said suddenly, "there is Mollie!"

Somehow the sight of her maid, attired in a sprigged muslin waist, streamers of pink ribbon and a blue skirt that did not reach her shoe tops, dancing with much spirit and evident enjoyment, brought home to Ivera, as nothing had hitherto done, the democracy of a new Western town, and the feeling of absolute equality that prevailed.

"Your servant, by George," ejaculated Jennings, and he laughed. The idea of mistress and maid meeting at a social function seemed even more singular to him than it did to the American girl.

"Is Mr. Prior here?" Ivera asked.

"Yes—haven't you met him? That is he standing near Eldridge."

"That thin, starved-looking little man?"

"Yes."

"I wish," Ivera said, hurriedly, "that you would introduce him."

"With pleasure."

Jennings brought up Prior, flattered and smirking. He was so gratified to meet Miss Lyle! It was such a long-hoped-for honor! Had Miss Lyle come as a critic? It was to be hoped that she proved a merciful one. Miss Lyle was charmingly cordial. Would not Mr. Prior sit down and look on? Mr. Prior accepted alertly the seat beside her, indicated by the slightest withdrawal of her dusky skirts.

"And now," avowed Miss Lyle, with the most entrancing air of consideration, "we shall let poor Mr. Jennings go and enjoy just one dance." The snowy teeth of Mr. Jennings went into temporary eclipse behind his thick lips. To be supplanted—and by Prior!

"Oh, I—I seldom dance, you know," he declared, with his strong English accent, "and I—I wouldn't care to, you

know, in such—er—such a mixed assemblage.”

“Then,” Miss Lyle said sweetly, “you will be good enough, I’m sure, to see if there is mail for me at the postoffice. Mr. Prior will take care of me until you return.”

So Jennings disappeared down the dirty stairs, disgusted at the favor shown Prior, but upheld by the consciousness of the impression his costume made on beholders.

Ivera Lyle went straight to the point. “Mr. Prior, what became of the letters and personal effects of Mark Dudley?”

“They are in my possession. Jardine decided they would be safe in my room at the hotel until Rob could come to town to look them over.”

“Have you any objection to sending the trunk out to the farm?”

“Not the slightest.”

“Then send it please. You may know,” in some embarrassment, “that there are letters of mine—”



"I quite understand. I shall send out the trunk in the morning. I see Eldridge is steering in this direction. Is he coming to speak with you?"

"I presume so. How are you, Doctor? Yes, Rob is doing very well, thank you. Mr. Prior, I wonder if you could secure a glass of water. This dust is choking."

As Prior went clattering down the stairway, Ivera turned to Eldridge. "You attended Mark Dudley, Doctor, I understand?"

He gave a violent start. His sallow, puffed face, with the peculiarly dilated eyes, looked into her own. "Mark Dudley? Yes—in a way. That is to say, he—he had consulted me."

CHAPTER IX.

"Weak words have struck."

—*Julius Cæsar.*

"**H**IS death was sudden?"
"Comparatively so. I had known for some time that his system was shattered. He had consulted me about his throat and heart. Although I detected no serious symptoms, I advised him. I was at a consultation at Gilead when he died. Prior met me when I returned, and took me over to the office, but I was too late to be of help."

"At what hour did you return?"

"About an hour after midnight, I think."

"Of what did he die, Doctor?"

"Of heart failure, following virulent diphtheria."

"Does diphtheria usually prove fatal to an adult?"

It seemed to Eldridge that Prior was a long time gone after that water. "Not usually—occasionally. His case was exceptional. His manner of living had rendered him susceptible to heart failure."

"His manner of living?"

"Well, he and Rob drank pretty hard, and they didn't get back any the better from their trips to the river towns. Then there was—oh, I beg pardon, Miss Lyle." He jumped up in sudden confusion as he recollected that Ivera Lyle was not the proper person to whom to confide the delinquencies of Mark Dudley and Robert Lyle.

"It is I who should ask pardon. I was curious, Here is Mr. Prior." She rose, bowed to Eldridge, tasted the glass of water Prior had brought, smiled at the arriving Jennings, and turned away with him.

"B—a—lance all. Swing your partners to the middle and four hands round," shrieked the prompter. "'Alleyman' left. Look out there, Fanny

Pollard—I said the left. Keep to your own set, you Si Bobinet. Say—some on you tell that jay with the red hair from Kansas he don't need to keep on a-swinging Mamie Myers when I say 'alleyman.' Now, once more! Let her go, boys! L—a—dy in the center, an' gents walk round!" The orchestra resumed their task of sawing the squeaky fiddles. The prompter stamped his foot and clapped his hands, and yelled instruction and admonitions. The shuffling of the heavy shoes recommenced. The festivity was at its height. In the intervals of the exercise the young men fanned the girls with their handkerchiefs, and the girls straightened their waist ribbons and surreptitiously twisted their bangs, which were becoming moist and straight. Jennings offered Ivera his arm and led her down the stairway. As they reached the street Jardine, swinging along, caught sight of them.

"Miss Lyle, what a condescension."

"Please don't be sarcastic. I have been interested."

"And you are deadly tired," he commented quickly.

"We are going to have supper at the meeting-house," Jennings interposed.

"That will be a dissipation. Good-night, Miss Lyle."

"Good-night."

A sheet-iron stove stood in the center of the room where the feast was in progress. At the further end was a cook stove, on which coffee stewed and oysters boiled in a way to make Monsieur Gouffé turn in his grave. The timid light from half a dozen lamps dignified the dinginess of the place. On the tables, around which hungry rustics clustered, overdone turkey and underdone pie disported with an audacity, a menace, a pallid prodigality appalling to behold.

"Why, ef it ain't Miss Lyle," cried a hearty voice. "You set right down here. Pa, he's gone to fetch me a plate of victuals. Your young man kin

git you some, too. Oh, Mr. Jennings, is it? Glad to meet you, sir. You been to the dance? I wanted reel bad to see the cavortin', but them legs of mine wouldn't let me git up the stairs."

"You are looking well, Mrs. McLeland."

"I bet I'm feelin' lots better'n he is," the old lady asserted emphatically.

"It was the day I ironed he come a-walking in by the alley, jest as cool as any iceberg I ever see—not that I ever seen one, to be quite voracious."

"But who—" began Ivera.

"He comes right in," continued the narrator, "an' ef he doesn't walk straight up to an apple tree an' begin to eat it." She drew back and gazed at Ivera, every single spiral of the uncurled tip on her bonnet quivering with indignation.

"If I only knew who—"

"I grabs a stick an' I runs at him. 'Git out,' I expurgates. He turns and kind of 'boists up his shoulders—this a-way—an' he stomps—oh, yes, he

stomps at me. I brung that stick straight down—it had thorns, too—onto his nose. Ef he didn't ascend on his hind legs, an' then come down on his hoofs, an' run at me. 'Come,' I screeched to my niece, 'an' bring a broomstick.' Quick as I says it he rars' an' comes at me again. I propelled him a second time over the nose. A thorn gets in his eye. He winks and squints—this-a-way—an' gits all blood-shot in the face. I didn't hit him over the horns. Don't you never hit one on 'em over the horns. The horns is their weppings. I could have empowered him by myself only fur my shortness of breath. Doublee—that's Pa's niece—

“What an odd name.”

“Her name's Ellen Eliza, but we call her Doublee for short—she ups with the broomstick, but he ups with her. He ducks down an' he hists up an' he makes a deposition of her onto me. Up comes Mrs. Stebbins a-runnin' with a hoe. 'Hit him hard!' I calls. 'I can't! I'm a-actin' on the offensive, an'

he's too scared to come nigh me. Hit him hard,' I says. So she hits him so hard she knocks him down, an' away she runs. 'Come quick,' I calls again, forgettin' all about our feud concernin' that there question of etiquette. 'I kilt him,' she shouts back. 'Then come back and kill him again!' I implores her, fur he was dancin' a polky on his two remotest feet up to Doublee and me. By way of procrastationin' I give him a whack that near broke as good a broomstick as was ever in use six months. That time he run." She paused, glowing, triumphant—a gladiator in repose.

"Here's your supper, Ma," put in a mild voice behind her chair.

"You jest hold on to that supper, Pa, till I git quit talkin'," she commanded tartly. "Well Miss Lyle, I got Pa to go an' prevaricate the marshal an' tell him that if that critter come here any more I'd discontinue his career. The marshal said he'd speak to the aggressive party, but the very

next day I seen him eatin' Miss Stebbins' clothesline, so I went and got a bed slat."

Ivera nodded sympathetically. Jennings stood with a cup of coffee he had brought held sideways, and the coffee trickling down on his immaculate glove.

"'Drive him down here,' I instructs her at the top of my voice. 'Drive him down here.' So she druv him. On he come—never a-seein' me. All at once he looks up. Our glances met. I swings up the bed slat an' I says, 'Old feller, do you know me?' I never got a chanst to use that bed slat. Fur quick as he seen me, an' noted the disparagement of my eyes, then he grunts an' hists hisself an' away he goes—gallopin'. And when Pa come home I says to him, 'I aint any troubadour of the arena, Pa, but I kin lick any billy goat in Bubble—or out'n it.' An' Pa he says—didn't ye, Pa? 'Ye kin, Maria—I'll bet on that ef I am a Methodist—ye kin'."

Ivera laughed until the tears came

into her eyes, and Jennings' harvest-moon face was one great grin of appreciation.

Ivera gave Jennings her hand when he left her at the door. "Thank you for a pleasant evening," she said. He drove off to the ranch in a condition of ecstasy.

Rob looked up at his sister with an affectionate smile as she came into the little parlor. "You're home early, dear. By the way, do you know the whereabouts of your domestic?"

"Mollie? She was at the dance. Everyone was at the dance. It was the oddest affair, Rob. Why do you ask?"

"Her father was here looking for her. He says her child is very ill—dying, they think."

Miss Lyle paused in the act of pulling off her glove. "Oh Rob! And you could not tell him where to find her? I must go up there."

"Where? Not to Chourka's?"

"Certainly. Why not? It is only

half a mile from here. They should know where to look for Mollie. I may be able to help the child. Aunt Rita's children were always ill, and I learned a good deal from her about what to do in emergencies."

"I'm afraid to have you go alone, I've."

"Oh, I'll be quite safe. Lie down until I get back, or, better still, go to bed. Your poor shoulder will feel better lying down. Don't you see I ought to go?"

She had never been at the home of the Chourkas, but she had seen it from the road. She walked rapidly west along the rough, brown road, a flitting black shape in the spectral starlight. A dull glow was visible in the window of the little log hovel she approached. She knocked. The door was opened by a stout, full-faced, black-haired man. He was in his stocking-feet, and had a pipe between his teeth.

"What you want?" he demanded ungraciously.

"Let me in, please. I am Miss Lyle. I came to tell you Mollie is at the dance in Bubble. I supposed she came home this morning. She may have gone to her friend's in the town. How is the baby?"

"Him dying, I guess," the man answered laconically, but with more civility than he had at first exhibited. "The old woman got him."

The one room the house contained was so low one could put up his hand and touch the ceiling. A ladder led to a sort of attic. In one corner was a bed covered with a patchwork quilt. On a table covered with red oilcloth were fragments of food and unwashed dishes. In a dirty little stove the fire was almost out. A woman, in a print dress, that was adorned, in fact held together, by patches, sat in a low chair. She was thin and stooped. Her scanty hair was almost white, and her face was seamed with many wrinkles. Most of her teeth were out. Her attitude and expression indicated indifference—



or hopelessness. A child about a year old lay across her knees. It was struggling to cough, and the sound of its hoarse breathing filled the room.

"Why don't you do something for the baby?" Ivera cried. "He is very sick."

The eyes of the woman, dull, sad, sunken, were lifted to her own. "We give medicines," she said. Her glance wandered to a vial on the table.

Ivera picked it up, read the label, set the bottle down. "But that isn't the right kind of medicine. That will not help him any."

"Medicine man say that cure everything. It cure chickens."

"It won't cure the child. He has croup. You must keep him warm—make him throw up,—he ought to have a hot bath. Tell your son to hurry and make a good fire. There is no time to lose."

The brigandish-looking man laughed in his black beard, and the woman

said listlessly, "Him not my son—him my husband."

"What matter?" She turned to the man imperiously. "Make a fire," she ordered. "Get the room hot. Put on water. Here," to the woman, "give me the child. Haven't you a blanket?"

The woman shook her head and pointed to the cotton quilt on the bed.

"That won't do."

She looked at the little limbs, cramped and purple under their one calico garment, then she took a step backward in the shadow of a high press. There was a swish of silk, a crisp, lawny rustle, then she came forward with a mess of soft white flannel in her arms and wrapped the shivering baby in it.

"You have mustard? Give it to me quick. Some water—lukewarm, yes, that will do." She held the child close in one arm while with her free hand she stirred the mixture.

"You spoil dress," the small patient's grandmother said warningly.

Ivera, trying to pour some of the

emetic down the throat of the tiny sufferer, called to the man clattering at the stove: "Let your wife attend to the fire. You go for the doctor and Mollie."

"No doctor. Doctor charge too mooch."

"Bring the doctor! I'll pay him." The child began to writhe in her arms.

"Another paroxysm is beginning. If we only had hot water to put him in—oh!"

The brassy cough sounded loud in the little room. The door opened. In all her cheap, gaudy finery, her hair frizzed, her face powdered, flushed with dancing and the night wind, Mollie stood on the threshold.

CHAPTER X.

"I am a feather for each wind that blows."

—*The Winter's Tale.*

THE girl's darting look encompassed her young mistress and her parents. Then she broke into a torrent of questions, spoken in her native tongue. The man replied to her, still poking in leisurely fashion at the fire, and drawing deliberate puffs at his pipe. Her mother, who had taken her seat on the bed, picked up an ear of corn and mechanically began to shell it into a tin boiler.

"Make haste, Mollie!" Ivera cried. "You can make a fire. Get some water hot—quick, I tell you. The baby is very sick."

But Mollie only broke into loud, wild, childish crying, and stood there helpless, the tears making streaks through

the red and white powders with which she had superfluously painted the roses of her face.

With a gesture of despair and entreaty Ivera turned to the man. "Why won't you go for the doctor? I've told you I'll pay him. I'll pay you to go for him. Here, Mollie, hold the little fellow. I'll make the fire."

But shrieking Mollie shrank back. "I no hold him!" she wailed. "Him going to die. Him shake so—I no hold him!"

The Eastern girl stamped her foot on the dirty floor. She turned to the crone, who, with bowed head, was apparently intent on her task. She pushed the boiler aside and thrust the baby into the woman's arms. The woman held the quivering bundle with the same air of stolidity with which she had shelled corn for the young pigs. One step brought Ivera to the stove. She took the poker from the man and began to rake out the ashes that choked the grate. The man made a motion

as if to help her, but she flashed an indignant glance at him.

"I told you to get a physician. If you won't do that you need not do anything." She was filling the stove with a greasy paper and cobs that lay behind it.

"Doctor no good. If it going die, it going die."

She twisted a strip of paper into a spiral, held it down the lamp chimney, and thrust it among the cobs, which blazed up bravely. There was a sound in the room which was not the hoarse, strangling cough of the baby. It was a laugh of admiration, low, lazy, chuckling. Ivera looked up. Chourka was regarding her. The teeth closed over the pipe stem, back of the handsome black beard, gleamed white. The glow in his eyes as they dwelt on her brought the blood to her cheeks.

"What a brute you are!" she commented frankly.

He laughed louder—a flattered laugh that shook his heavy shoulders. Mol-

lie had crept over to where the child lay in the loose clasp of her mother. She was gazing down on it, her round, dark eyes wide with terror.

"Mollie," Ivera cried sharply, as she swung a kettle of water on the fire that was roaring up the cracked stove-pipe, "your father won't go for the doctor. Do you want your baby to die?"

"Oh, no, no! I go—I get him!"

She ran from the house. A couple of minutes later Ivera heard the clatter of a horse's hoofs as it tore toward the town. Past the Lyle farmhouse, down the quarry incline, over the state line into Kansas and back again, skirting the railroad track, past the unfenced lumber-yard, its piles of boards looming white in the night, past the dark file of freight cars, up the deserted street, to the office of Doctor Eldridge, Mollie rode furiously. She dropped from the horse. There was a light behind the blind. She slammed back the door.

"Come!" the girl-mother panted.

"My baby going die—come!" Eldridge started up, as did Jardine, who was sitting at the other side of the stove. "Miss Lyle, she say hurry!" Mollie entreated.

The physician picked up his hat from the floor, put it on, reached for his medicine case, and went out to the stable in the rear to hitch up.

"What has Miss Lyle to do with it?" Jardine asked.

"She mind the boy. When I go home from dance she there. She hold him. Him awful sick."

"Mollie!" The stockman went nearer the bright, fluttering, young figure, in its absurd finery. "Have you told Miss Lyle about — about the baby's father?"

His voice was threatening. She cowered back from that and the sternness in his face.

"No—no! I never did! I hope to die if I did!"

Then she ran out, scrambled up on her horse and went loping back. When

she reached home she saw her mistress on her knees beside a tub of steaming water. Her reddish silk sleeves were pushed well up on her white arms. She was holding the little sufferer in the water and skillfully bathing him.

"Him better!" cried Mollie.

But Ivera said, "I'm afraid not." The palpitating body on her arm was struggling hard.

"I know him better!" avowed Mollie, impatiently. "His cough no sound bad."

Ivera did not answer. She kept on sponging the hot water over the little chest and throat. She noticed that the breathing was more labored and growing weaker. A shadow came between her and the light. She glanced up at Eldridge. Leaning forward she swept the warm white flannel from a chair near the stove, and, lifting the baby into it, sat up. Eldridge bent over the baby, looked at it—listened.

"Is there any hope, Doctor?" Miss Lyle whispered.

The hoarse cough—much weaker—sounded again. The tiny face turned livid. Eldridge straightened up and shook his head.

“Mollie,” called Ivera, without looking up, “come, he may miss you—may want you.”

Reluctantly Mollie edged nearer. She peered at the little convulsed creature in Ivera’s arms.

“Do you wish to take him, Mollie?”

“No—no!” panted Mollie. Suddenly she shrieked. For with a pitiful, straining cry the baby had struggled fiercely, stiffened—lay very still.

There was an instant of silence, tense, profound. Then Mollie sprang forward, tore the body of her child from Ivera, and, squatting on the floor, rocked backward and forward, screaming and sobbing. Her father lit a fresh pipe. Her mother picked up another ear of corn, and resumed her interrupted task. Ivera took a step toward Eldridge. She was pale, and her dress was wet and stained. She

spoke a few words to the physician, in a low voice. Despite her noisy grief Mollie heard. Her wailing ceased as suddenly as does that of an easily-appeased but fractious child. She no longer rocked herself violently. A sob was stifled at her lips. She lifted a flushed, wet, smeared, eager face.

"A coffin?" she echoed. "You buy coffin? It have a plate—an' handles? Oh, pretty plate—pretty handles!"

"Whatever you wish," replied Miss Lyle.

Mollie scrambled to her feet, and, without even a look, laid the dead child down on the bed.

"Oh, good, good!" she cried, gladly, and clapped her hands. "Then we have plate an' handles to hang up like other people. Them so pretty. All got them but us—the Stepniks—the Chivneys—all of them. No one die here before but my sister. Pa made her box. Oh, handles an' plate! Words on plate?" Her countenance was beaming with satisfaction.

"Mollie! Yes—yes, words—if you care. The name, you mean?"

Mollie darkened and drew back.

"Him got no name."

"I know. But you can have the first name if you like."

Mollie looked down—sidled up to the speaker. When she spoke it was in a whisper.

"The man be mad if I tell you that."

"What man?"

"That man," with a jerk of her head.

Ivera looked toward the door. For the first time her gaze rested on Jardine, who had come in with the doctor and was now talking to him.

"Oh!" she said softly. Then, "Tell Mr. McLelland to put 'Mollie's Baby' on the plate. Won't that do?" She was putting on her hat and coat as she spoke.

"That so nice!" cried Mollie, delightedly.

Miss Lyle walked to the door. The men moved aside. Eldridge spoke hastily.

"May I drive you home, Miss Lyle? Jardine, I'll wait for you and drive you into town. You can walk as far as Rob's."

"All right," returned Jardine. His eyes were intent upon Ivera, but she did not look at him, nor give any intimation that she was aware of his presence. Eldridge drove her home. She opened the door that was on the latch, and went into the front room. The lights were burning, but Rob had gone to bed. She stood listening until she heard the sound of firm footsteps coming down the road, then voices and the roll of wheels.

After a while Rob—who had not slept—heard low sobbing.

"What is the matter, dear?" he called out.

"Nothing," she said, impatiently. "Go to sleep. I'm tired. That's all."

CHAPTER XI.

"But, shall I speak my conscience?"

—*Henry VI.*

SNOW, fine and feathery, fell toward morning. The day dawned divinely. The oppressive, intimate Nebraska sky that lowers above the plains seemed more deeply domed, and farther away than usual. Its tint was the soft, grayish blue of a wild pigeon's wing. Pale and fleecy clouds hovered in the north. The world was a world of silver, for the snow and the sunshine and the mists had produced a marvelous mirage, in which clumps of cottonwoods drifted, and farmhouses floated, and in which all objects were unreal and without anchorage. Nowhere was there any color, only delicate shadings and the glitter of the dry snow that fell like diamond dust in powdery pro-

fusion from brown branches. Even the sun was only a great silver ball swimming in a silver sea. The Lyles breakfasted late. Both were homesick, so they talked much and laughed often.

Ivera had merely mentioned the fact that Mollie's baby had died. Rob was afraid she might ask some embarrassing questions, but beyond the simple statement she said nothing on the subject.

"Now," Rob declared, rising from the table, "I'm going to take you for a drive. We have no other way of celebrating Christmas, and it's such a rattling fine day."

They drove for hours, west and north, and east, and then south again. They talked of home and friends, but neither spoke of acquaintances in the new world wherein they found themselves. Everywhere the cornstalks, tattered and tawny, towered above the white-clad mold. Here and there on the uplands it had been cut and stacked, the pointed shocks looking like gypsy

tents or the camps of a resting army. The creek was outlined by a hazy purple, the same shadow seeming to tinge the bluffs that rose beyond. Still further away were vistas of

“Ground’s most gentle dimplement,
As if God’s finger touched but did not press.”

It was when they were in Kansas, on high ground, and driving northward, that Ivera pointed to the left.

“Is not that a cemetery?”

“Oh, yes—one of them.” There was evasion in the reply.

“Is it the one in which Mark Dudley is buried?”

“Yes.”

“Let me out here, please.”

He drew rein on the hill. His sister stepped out and walked across the wet drab grass toward the scattered mounds and the upright slabs of stone. No fence or barrier railed this spot off from the rest of the prairies. Several of the graves were decorated. One was covered with oyster shells. Another had

paper flowers in a glass case. On a few little flags hung limply. But where the decorations were visible the earth had been freshly turned. Others were covered only by the bleached grass and the snow. There were not half a score of slabs in all—only one that was imposing. Ivera stood and read the lines on the pretentious headstone:

Sacred to the Memory

or

Mark Meredith Dudley, etc.

“Jump in, quick, dear,” Robert urged, when she returned to the road. “This ghastly place gives a fellow cold shivers down his spine.”

“Rob, who paid for that extraordinary headstone?”

“Prior and—and I.”

“And Mr. Jardine?”

“Great Scott, no! What had Jardine to do with it?”

“I was only wondering. I saw him last night.”

"Jardine? He used never to go to dances."

"I did not see him at the dance. I saw him at Chourka's."

"Lord! Jardine out at that scoundrelly Bohemian's! What took him there?"

"How should I know? He drove out there with Dr. Eldridge, I believe."

"Who went for Eldridge?"

"Mollie."

"Were you at the house before Mollie got back from the dance?"

"Yes, I sent her to town."

"Oh, then she probably met the men together, and mentioned that you were there, so Jardine went out with Eldridge."

"What difference would my being there make to Mr. Jardine?"

Robert waited to reach out with his whip and flick a clod from the shoulder of the off horse before he answered.

"Oh, I didn't mean that exactly. You don't get this kind of a sunset back in Illinois."

When they reached home Mollie was waiting on the doorstep.

"What is it, Mollie?" Miss Lyle asked.

"I come some more to work."

"But, Mollie—the baby!"

"Him put in ground. I got plate an' two handles—all shiny an' pretty."

"He is buried? Where?"

"Out in pasture."

"Why did you bury him there?"

"My father say one place good as another," returned Mollie, indifferently.

She went about her accustomed duties with her ordinary air of sullenness. She did not speak unless addressed, then her answers were of the briefest. But when, after supper, Ivera went into the kitchen to give her some directions, Mollie asked, without lifting her head: "Mr. Dudley—him friend of yours?"

Her mistress turned quickly. "Yes—oh yes. I knew him well."

"So pretty man," Mollie said, plaintively.

"He was handsome," Ivera returned, coldly. She moved toward the door.

"Don't go!" begged Mollie.

Ivera paused. Mollie was washing a plate with much unnecessary energy.

"Was Mr. Dudley going to marry you?"

Miss Lyle hesitated. Then she said: "Yes."

Mollie, pouring boiling water over her dishes, suddenly screamed. She had poured it over her wrist also.

"Oh, dear!" Ivera cried. "That is too bad, Mollie! Wait a minute till I tie it up. Here, let me put on this soda and the white of egg. There—don't cry! I'll tie this handkerchief over. It is old and soft. Stand still."

She worked quickly and deftly. Mollie, standing there dumb and resentful, noticed the slim, white fingers hovering with butterfly touches over her huge, rough, toil-hardened hands. She jerked her hand away so suddenly the faintly fragrant handkerchief

fell to the floor. Her pretty, babyish face flushed darkly.

"I hate you!" she panted bitterly, "I hate you!"

"Mollie!" helplessly. "Why do you say that?"

"I hate you," the girl repeated. Then she flung her blue print apron over her head, and sank cowering and sobbing in a chair. Ivera looked at her a minute, then turned and went away. When she came back later the dishes had been set away, and Mollie, a great scarlet blotch on her wrist, was sweeping.

"I sorry I tell you that," she muttered.

"Very well. We will think no more about it."

"But Mr. Dudley—"

"No," Ivera interrupted, with gentle severity, "we shall not speak of Mr. Dudley."

"But," persisted Mollie, leaning on her broom, "you say him dead."

"Yes, he is dead."

Mollie slowly shook her head. A smile that was half mysterious, half malicious crossed her lips.

"Him do live," she said.

"Mollie!"

"Oh, I know him not dead. Can Mr. Rob hear?"

"No, he is asleep. Go on." Ivera gripped her fingers tight, and held her breath.

"It was when my sister I did told you of, that got no plate or handles, was very sick. She tell me get doctor. I take lantern an' walk to Bubble. When I got near town buggy come. I wave lantern. When buggy stop I say, 'This doctor?' Eldridge him always have lantern. A man say 'No.' Then buggy drive quick away. But two peoples was in buggy. One was Mr. Jardine. One was Mr. Dudley."

Ivera Lyle drew a long, full breath. "Supposing so, what has that to do with Mr. Dudley's death?"

Nodding mysteriously, Mollie drew nearer.

“When I get to Bubble folks say: ‘Mark Dudley dead. Him died eleven o’clock night before last one. They take him on hill yesterday.’ I go there. I see new grave. I know what in it they call Mark Dudley, but I know, too—” She stopped short, flinging out her hand with a little incredulous gesture.

“Jardine — always Jardine!” Ivera thought passionately. Jardine in her strange vision! Jardine cautioning Mollie to silence! Jardine at the Chourkas! And now — Jardine again! She had not been mistaken then in from the first associating him with the sudden death of her lover? Was he dead? If not, where had he been spirited? And for what motive?

“Have you spoken to Mr. Jardine about this?”

“Once. He look hard at me. Then he laugh, an’ say: ‘You was dream, Mollie.’”

“But he warned you not to tell me about it?”

"No. He never say that. He only say I have dream."

"He did not make you promise not to tell me about it?"

"Not," Mollie declared, in confusion, "not—about that."

"About what, then?"

Mollie walked away to set her broom in the corner. "I don't have talk 'bout that," she said. "I never tell you anything," she went on, without turning her head, "only you get me shiny plate and pretty handles."

"But, Mollie, when you saw a man alive, whom everyone else believed to be dead, why did you not speak about it? People might have been doing something very wrong. You should have spoken."

"I don't want get put in jail. Lots peoples gets put in jail."

"But you think you saw Mr. Jardine driving Mr. Dudley out of town at the time folks in Bubble considered him dead and buried."

Mollie's full mouth curved contempt-

uously. "Don't you 'spose," she questioned insolently, "I know Mark when I see him?"

Mark! The hot color flew over Ivera's throat and face. Mark!

"You mean Mr. Dudley," she said, quietly.

Mollie swung around. Her full, supple young form seemed to swell and pulsate. There was a deep, bold look in her eyes that instantly recalled to Ivera the man who had leered at her across the kitchen stove the night previous.

"I mean Mark!"

For a minute neither spoke. Then Miss Lyle said: "You must not speak to me again, Mollie, of any gentleman I know—or have known. Have breakfast ready at seven. Mr. Lyle is leaving for a trip." She passed into the front room and closed the door.

CHAPTER XII.

"To be slow in words is a woman's only virtue!"

—*Two Gentlemen of Verona.*

THE next day Ivera drove Rob into Bubble to catch the train for Omaha.

"I'll be back the day after to-morrow, sure," he promised. "I'll bring you some fruit, and candy, and something to read. It's beastly lonely for you out here, after the life you've been accustomed to. Better visit Mrs. Mc and talk to her a while before you drive back. She will cheer you up. She always does me. Jerusalem! How mad she was when she found I did not require Pa's tender care!" He laughed with boyish heartiness at the recollection.

"Cheer me up!" disdainfully. "Yes—with the recital of some of her mor-

tuary memories. For people who have been only a few weeks in the undertaking business they have the most varied assortment of experiences to relate one could imagine. Did she tell you about the very tall man who was supposed to be fatally ill, for whom 'Pa' shipped in a 'coffin?' No? Well, the man didn't die, and now Pa is undecided whether he ought to retain the casket, in the hope of later securing him, or some individual of similar proportions, or chop a piece off the end and complete it to fit the ordinary mortal."

Rob's joyous laugh rang out again. "She's great, I've! She's the salt of my existence out here. She's my social salvation." He glanced at his watch, and whipped up the horses.

"She evidently considers you a sad reprobate."

"Of course. That is why she likes me."

"You graceless egotist!"

"Honestly, dear—there's the whistle

now!—go up to see her. And switch her off from 'shop.' Get her to tell you about her ministers. She's strong on ministers when she gets started. Good-bye. Take care of yourself."

When Ivera knocked at Mrs. McLelland's door she heard within the sound of a harsh and grating noise.

"Come in," called the familiar voice of the mistress of the house.

Ivera opened the door, but hesitated on the threshold. Was this her stately visitor—her majestic neighbor? This old woman, gowned in the most limp and faded of cotton garments, her teeth out, her nose and chin almost meeting, her hair just a gray frazzle around her shrewd old face.

"Set down. I'm glad to see you. No, you won't bother me a mite. I was goin' to quit, anyhow. I'm plum beat gittin' that spider cleaned. I scraped it for 'n hour with a stone, and then let it set with some hot fat in it, an' scraped again. Of all the plaguey things a rusted spider 's wors 'n any."

Ivera looked at the battered iron pan in the firm old hand. "It isn't worth all that work, is it?" she asked.

"Mebbe not," dryly, "but you see we ain't Cresotes, me and Pa. He ain't sold but one coffing this week, an' that was fur Moll Chourka's child. The profit on that ain't goin' to more'n keep us in sweetnin' fur our coffee an' Composition Tea fur a month. Pa says there ain't no money in babies, anyway."

"But I understood Mr. McLelland was rich."

"What say?" She ceased scraping the pan, and looked up alertly. "Rich? Well, he's got some. But I give him his start. Yes, sir, I had two hundred dollars saved, an' I give it to him. That was over thirty year ago. He owes me that money an' interest now—yes, interest. Fur all the time I've been married to Pa I ain't spent a dime once that I didn't look at it twice first. I worked hard when I was young. I raised more bronze

turkeys than you ever seen. I bet you never raised a bronze turkey. No? That's what I expatiated. Well, it's harder'n raisin' a stepchild—an' that's hard enough. I know. I've done both. Onct, when I lived near Chicago, a funny thing happened. A city lady was out to my place. She was repairin' her health. I called her to the back door long about the time I knowed the turkeys would be streakin' up the field. After a while along they come—the purtiest sight you ever seen. My, but they was fat, and worth twenty cents to the pound. Would you believe it? that woman kinder looked at them, an' then gazed kind of dreamy like over their very heads, an' says she: 'What a beautiful view you have from here, Mrs. McLelland!' Yes, she did. Beautiful—view! Jest a lot of water an' trees. An' never a word about them fat turkeys. I ain't had much use for city women sence then. I reely, don't think, though," she concluded chari-

tably, "that she was quite right in her head."

"Perhaps not," Ivera acquiesced, gently. Then she volunteered the statement that she had driven Rob in to catch the train for Omaha.

"Omaha, eh?" The bright old eyes blinked at her. "I wonder if he'll come home sober this time."

"Rob! Why, Mrs. McLelland, Rob doesn't drink!"

"Oh, mercy me!" cried Mrs. McLelland. She set down the frying pan and laughed until her huge body shook so that every heavy white dish in the closet clattered in sympathy. "Rob ain't that kind—not Rob Lyle! Next thing you'll be sayin' mebbe is that that old crony of his'n—who had to go an' with the angels stand before Pa bought out the undertakin' business here, or he'd have been put under cheaper an' with more style than Mahasby put him fur the same money—I s'pose you'll say that he didn't drink neither, or do nothin' else he ought to

be ashamed on. Ef ever there was a pair of angelical sperits it was them two—Rob Lyle an' Mark Dudley!"

"Mrs. McLelland, I—"

"I ain't a-blamin' you a lick. But that there Dudley ought to've known he couldn't promulgate existence much longer at the rate he was a-livin'!"

"But, Mrs. McLelland—"

"Oh, a nice fellow—yes. Handsome, an' allus a-laughin'—liked well enough, too. But my! Weren't he reckless and dissipated, an' in fur deviltry that didn't care who it hurted?"

"You don't know, I think, that I was to have married Mark Dudley."

The undertaker's wife slowly greased the pan she had taken up and placed it on the stove. Then she fished her teeth out of the water bucket and deliberately inserted them.

"No," she said, "I didn't. You ought to be right thankful to the Lord that saved you from doin' it. Ef I'd been prevented by a merciful providence from cleavin' to my first or sec-

ond, I'd have less experience to-day and more peace of mind."

Miss Lyle's lips were trembling a little, but there was a smile in her eyes.

"You were married three times?"

"Was I? The first was that smart a body couldn't fool him. The second was that simple he warn't worth foolin'. But Pa—" She paused expressively. "There's this I will say, though," she concluded briskly, "there ain't one on 'em that ever talked poetry to me. That's a thing I wouldn't have stood. Would you?"

Miss Lyle's brows, with their beautiful curve, like the sweep of a black-bird's wing, were ever so slightly lifted. "How can I tell, Mrs. McLelland?"

"Oh, to besure!" disdainfully. "You're that young. Well, I asked my niece who had the oyster weddin' whatever her and Hiram was a-talkin' about at the gate till all hours—nigh on to ten some nights. An' she said he was talking poetry. Did you ever hear the

beat of that? Poetry! When folks git to that I ain't got one more word to say. Thank heaven, my two first, with all their peculations, never as much as matriculated poetry to me. Fur as Pa goes, he couldn't tell poetry from porcupine—an' he ain't ever become acclimated to porcupines. An' I'm glad on it. Ef there's anythin' I despise its hearin':

‘The rose is red, the vi’lets blue,
Sugar is sweet, an’ so is you.’

I got sense enough to know colors without bein' told, an' when things go right I'm sweet, an' when they go wrong I ain't."

Ivera recollected Rob's advice. "I think I heard you have a minister in town now," she said.

"We have that—a pretty one. I'll tell you the way he served me. Pa is a Methodist, an' a prominent one at that. Why, when they talked of buildin' a church here last meetin', Pa he stood right up an' put his hand in his

pocket an' give seventy-five cents—yes, he did. Who opens up the meetin' house for service? Pa. Who builds the fires? Pa. Who rings the bell? Pa. Who brings the preacher home with him to dinner? Pa. An' I kin tell you it takes a pretty prominent man to do all that. Sunday mornin' the preacher told in meetin' as how he wanted to transpose his fambly here from Lowy, an' that he didn't have but two dollars an' sixteen cents. He asked the congregation to help him to domestic delight by a conscription. Now, though I don't approve of preachers progenitin' famblies in as copious a manner as they do, an' neither I know does Pa, our last minister havin' near nine children when he left here, an' this one bein' possessed of posterity to the extent of two an' a half sets of twins, yet when he said that, an' everyone kept so shet of breath you could hear the windmill down at the depot a-swiggerin' round, Pa he stands up an' he says: 'Never shall it be said that a

poor and prolific preacher appealed to me in vain!' He's a powerful affluent orationist when he gets a start, is Pa. 'Here am I,' he says, 'a undertaker whose business is bad at present, but I'm going to shame the rest on you.' With that he planks down a quarter. His example was contiguous. They all paid up then. When that preacher sat down to our table he was richer by three dollars an' twenty-three cents. Who was to thank? Pa."

The shapeless form swathed in the brown calico quivered with pride. Miss Lyle, her pretty chin propped on one little gloved hand, murmured a eulogistic word or two.

"I treated him kind," Mrs. McLelland panted on. "I give him all the skim milk he could drink, an' I told him ef he was used to piecin' to step into the butt'ry at any time, an' get hisself some bread and sorghum. Now what more'n that could a body say?" Ivera gently inferred that such hospi-

talily scouted suggestion as it defied criticism.

“That day we had potpie fur dinner, an’ ef there’s one thing I can make its potpie. To be sure the rooster was three year old, but after I’d soaked him over night and biled him hard fur four hours he was that tender you’d think you was eatin’ stewed feathers. I’d mixed dough of sour milk an’ sody, an’ cooked it right in with the chicking. ‘Did you ever taste such chicking potpie as that before?’ I asks the preacher. He considers like. Then he recapitulates: ‘Onct.’ I began to approximate wrath, but I knowed he was only trying to discommode my equilibrium, so I asks—holdin’ back the second spoon of soup till I heerd the answer: ‘Where?’ An’ he says: ‘Here—onct.’ Then I give him the other spoon of soup, an’ we all laughed an’ laughed. I says: ‘I remember—but we had watermillion that day, too. We lived on the farm then. We ain’t got any watermillion

today.' But he repudiates me fur that. 'Mrs. McLelland,' he says, 'I'm that there full of this here potpie I couldn't partake of watermillion ef it was visible to the denuded eye this minit!'"

The soft pink in the listener's cheek had deepened into a rose.

"That was a tribute!" she said warmly.

"We had what was left of the potpie cold for supper, an' jest as the preacher finished soppin' up the last speck of gravy with a bit of bread he says: 'To-night I'm goin' to announce a protracted revival meetin'.' 'When to begin?' I asks. 'To-morrow evenin',' he says. Then I tells him straight: 'No, you ain't. Pa can't be revived jest now. He's got a shoat to kill to-morrow, an' he can't bother about the bell. He's got corn to shell, an' he won't have no time to go buildin' fires.' He says: 'Can't them things wait?' And I expostulates they couldn't. 'Procraster-

natin', I says, 'Pa never was, an' procrasternatin' Pa never will be. A nice revivin' you'd have without Pa—the pretty voice he's got, too.' No more was said then, but that night when I looked at that preacher a-prayin', I says to myself: 'Well, ef you ain't got the queerest shaped head that was ever hung onto any man!'"

"What kind of a head was it?" questioned Miss Lyle from behind the bit of cambric held over her rebellious lips.

"I can't eggsactly make my meanin' reprehensible to you, but it was that kind of a shape that ef I was a widow next week, which I've been twice before, an' ef he was the only man to be had, I wouldn't have him."

Ivera insinuated that this was statin' the case very strongly indeed.

"While I was convolving this in my mind I heard him say: 'Brethren we will begin to-morrow night a protracted revival meetin'!' You could have knocked me over with a corncob.

When we got home I says to him: 'To sustain his prominent position in sassiety Pa must consent, but I regard with aversion your onconsideration.' He retired, an' me and Pa was settin' by the stove discussin' the inconvenience of bein' revived jest then, when down he come askin' ef he could have some blankets. Blankets, mind you! Now, we got one pair that Pa give me fur a Christmas present ten year ago, thinkin' they be as exceptionable as any other trinket. We never put 'em on but once—that was the night of the blizzard. Then we laid 'em reel light over everything else. But Pa put him in them blankets, an' let him sleep in them *all night*. Down he comes to the sink in the mornin', an' there he stands, a-combin' his hair with my comb, an' a-singing' psalms at the top of his voice. I was washin'. 'Its a handsome day,' I says reel pleasant, conflectin' how his conscience must have retrograded him every time he turned in them blankets. 'Kin I rense out



anythin' fur you?' I knowed right well he'd only two handkerchiefs an' three paper collars. 'No,' he says, short as berry cake an' stiff as starch. He sets down to the table an' puts into him all the coffee that was left, nigh a loaf of bread an' a slab of cold pork. Then he takes his hat. 'Where air you goin'?' I asks. 'To visit my flock,' he says. I never set eyes on him from that minit to this!"

The deep depression of the tone dismayed Miss Lyle. "What happened him?" she inquired quickly.

Mrs. McLelland shook her head.

"I never knowed a thing about it until that snub-nose Mrs. Stebbins come a-runnin' over. You know we had made up our dissuasion concernin' a question of etiquette after our fight with the billy goat, in which she ably reinstated me. Still I can never have any real infinity fur a lady who uses hog's lard to make her bangs stick, an' put vaniller on her handkerchief. 'Your preacher is a-stayin' up to Muggsley's,'

she says. 'He declares Sister McLelland insulted him, an' there's goin' to be a investigation.' Think of that, now, will you? A investigation of me! Me, who lived in Illinois only a hundred and twenty mile from Chicago. Me, whose husband give that same impecuniary preacher a quarter to bring his prodigy from Iowy! Me, who give him all the potpie he could mastercate, an' permitted him to piece, an' let him lie in blankets that was fit fur the President! 'Its more'n a outrage, Pa,' I says, 'it's a preponderance. An' when that investigationin' begins ef they don't hear from me, preacher, sweet-smellin' Christian an' all, it's a pity,' I says to Pa, 'it's a pity!'"



CHAPTER XIII.

"He is rash and very sudden in choler."

—*Othello*.

"**B**OX come for you," Mollie announced in her usual resentful tone.

"A box—for me?" Ivera stood, her fur coat half pulled off, and looked inquiringly at her maid.

"Boy say Mr. Prior send it."

"Oh, yes, I was expecting it. That is all right." She felt relieved to consider that Rob was away. She did not attempt to open the trunk until Mollie was asleep. She regarded the leather trunk with emotion. The initials "M. M. D." stamped on one end recalled the inscription on the showy headstone. With a poker she wrenched the lock open and threw back the lid. The contents of the trunk were neatly arranged. She soon found what she had

sought—her own letters and photograph. These she promptly tossed into the fire. Then she searched for a thick, small morocco book. She found two. She recollected that Mark had sent her the diaries he had kept during the first three years of their separation. Then he had written that he felt convinced such gifts evidenced conceit on his part, and that he would bore her with no more details of his uninteresting life. Here, then, was the limning of almost two years. She closed the trunk, pushed it into a corner, and sat down to discover, if possible, some clew to the death or disappearance of her lover, either of which she persisted in regarding as mysterious.

The little room was warm and cozy. Without a mighty wind raged. It rattled every limb of the cottonwoods that formed the break of the young orchard. It shook all the clumsily constructed doors and windows. It puffed the carpet into wavy woolen bubbles all over the room. And it kept the windmill,

prisoned in winter bondage, straining and struggling like a fettered giant.

Ivera glanced hastily through the diary bearing the earlier date. The memoranda were chiefly of business, and contained no hint that might guide her in her quest. She laid it down and opened the second book at random. She read a single line. One name caught her eye. The writing was shaky to illegibility. The line she read ran: "That damn saint of a Jardine suspects something."

"Jardine. Always Jardine!" She started up to carry the book nearer the lamp, to read by better light the almost undecipherable sentences which preceded and followed the suggestive words. The sound of footsteps approaching the house startled her. Someone was trying the front door. Rob had been gone two days. Might it not be he?

"Hello, Ive! Let me in."

She dropped the diary she held be-

side the other on the little table and flew to open the door.

"Rob, dear. When you did not get home earlier I made up my mind not to expect you until to-morrow night. Come in. Have you had supper? Such a maniacal wind— isn't it?"

"Yes, it's a beastly night."

His voice sounded odd. His eyes were dull and his face looked red and stupid. He pulled off his cap and overcoat and sat down near the stove.

"Did you make a satisfactory arrangement with those grain dealers?"

"Very satisfactory. They gave me the three thousand I claimed."

"That is good."

"I haven't all of it. I ran against some hard luck down there. The game was a bit too steep, and I—where in thunder did you get that?"

He had started up at sight of the trunk.

"Mr. Prior sent it out."

"Who asked him to send it here?"

"I."

"The hell you did."

"Robert!" his sister cried. She looked at the flushed, wrathful, boyish face. A new comprehension darkened in her eyes.

He muttered an apology. He was conscious of his own condition. His nervousness and irritability were the inevitable result of his indulgence. They would wear off with abstinence as they had worn off before. But he had not reckoned on finding the trunk of his former partner staring him in the face. Opened too, by Jove! He and Jardine had once talked over Dudley's absurd habit of keeping a diary. Both had recollected the conversation the night the office was burned, when Jardine saved the trunk. Who could say what that scatterbrain had not put on paper? The door of the little stove stood ajar, Lyle could see the heap of charred and blackened papers within.

"What have you been burning?"

"My letters."

"Well, I must say I think it deuced

bad form, and not at all what I'd have expected of you, Ive, to go prying into poor Mark's belongings this way."

She regarded him steadily. She had grown very white while he was speaking. "I have merely burned my letters and my picture. Those and his diaries are all that I am interested in."

"His diaries?" He glanced around quickly. He saw the little leathern books on the table. He picked them up. "These?" he queried.

"Yes."

"I'll read them first. I think that is only proper. There may be things in them Mark would not like you to know."

He put the books in his breast pocket. His lips were "fumbling for a sort of smile."

"You are sure there is nothing in them *you* would not like me to know?"

"What rubbish. Forgive me, dear, but you are provoking. As if it were not only the—the honor of my friend I care about. You are morbid on this

subject. The isolation here is increasing your tendency to brood over the death of your lover. I think—I'm very unselfish to admit it—that you would be happier at home than out in this wretched desert."

"Won't you give me back those books, Robert?"

"Not," stubbornly, "until I've read them."

"You are unfair," she cried, desperately. "I have the first right to them. I shall tell you now what I told Mr. Jardine some time ago—the reason I came west. I came to find out how Mark Dudley died."

"Wh—at?" quavered Rob. His mouth was twitching.

"I am going to have the grave opened," she went on resolutely. "I shall discover if he died a natural death, or if he still lives."

"You shall not," Rob Lyle screamed in a voice of terror. "I'll never allow it. You must not disgrace me by doing anything of the sort." She was

thunderstruck by his dismay. He was frantic with fear. How comparatively calm Jardine had been when she had mentioned her suspicions to him! And yet it was Jardine, she felt assured, who had played the principal part in the tragedy connected with the death or disappearance of her lover.

"Disgrace you!" she said, shrinking a little from his face, his expression, his breath. She passed into her own room, and closed and locked the door. There was just a dim, gray glimmer in the outer world when she bent over Mollie and gently shook her.

"Mollie—Mollie, wake. Get up!"

Mollie sleepily shrugged the bed-clothes higher around her shoulders.

"So soon?" she murmured.

"Yes, at once, Mollie."

When the girl appeared in the little kitchen she saw that the fire was burning, and that breakfast was on the table. She ate, making no comment. Ivera laid a handful of silver by her plate.

"Get your clothes together, Mollie, I am sending you home. I shall not need you any more. I am paying you extra because I have not given you notice." Mollie carefully counted over the money. It paid for two weeks she had not served.

"You send me away—why? I do work right. You send me because I say that night—?"

"No—no. Not because of anything you said, Mollie. You have done the work very nicely indeed. But I am not going to keep house any longer. Mister Rob will get on as he did before I came. That is all. I am not angry or annoyed with you. Good-bye."

But when Mollie had collected her scant belongings she still lingered on the doorstep. In her short skirt and little tight jacket, her face fresh, rosy, drowsy-eyed, the blending of lamplight and dawn lending her flattering illumination, she looked more childish than ever. But she was evidently ill at ease. She stared down at the toe of

her clumsy shoe. She punched holes with her finger in the paper covering the bundle she held. Once she quickly lifted her lashes, and as hurriedly they drooped again. Then she moved a step inward, and stood—her glistening white teeth sunk in her full red underlip, awkward but unembarrassed, undecided but imperturbable.

Ivera, moving swiftly and lightly around the kitchen, washing up the dishes, putting them away, arranging a clean tablecloth, glanced toward the motionless figure. "Well," she asked kindly, "what is it, Mollie?" The girl dropped her bundle—turned. She made a rush in the direction of her young mistress. She flung her arms around her. She burst out crying.

"I want kiss you—I do want kiss you. I no hate you like I say. You too good. I say that lie because I get mad—mad—when I think him love you. I did not want that him should love you ever—ever—only me;"

and she pressed her lips to the cheek near her own.

Miss Lyle disengaged herself.

"Whom did you wish should not love me, Mollie?"

But Mollie only stood and stared at her, her round eyes dark with doubt. "Do you mean—" Ivera broke off—was silent. Suddenly she brought the question out with a wrench, "Do you mean Mr. Jardine?" Mollie looked puzzled. All at once a dazzling smile irradiated her heavy features. She nodded emphatically and laughed, although the tears were still bright on her lashes.

"Yes—yes—him, of course — Mr. Jardine." She smiled all the way home. The consciousness of a good and clever act sustained her. Then there was the prospective pleasure of playing with the pretty plate and handles, and exhibiting them to those who, unfortunately, could not boast the possession of such trophies. She found the anticipation delightful.

CHAPTER XIV.

"And as we walk along I dare be bold."

Two Gentlemen of Verona

THE town looked insignificant ; straggling, and glaringly new w. Ivera entered it that day. The shone, but a bitter wind—the everling wind of the plains—was blowing

Mrs. McLelland, massive and majestic, stood at her back door. She wore a sunbonnet, regardless of season, and a little red shawl fluttered back from her heavy shoulders. The wind blew about her cotton gown, revealing her huge but not ungainly proportions. On her feet were white h and green carpet slippers.

"Good morning, Mrs. McLellan," said Miss Lyle.

The old lady responded with a shake of the head. "Mornin'. Now, what I want to know is this: Did you see a

an' three chickings as you come into town?"

"A hen? And three chickens?"

"That's it. Pa, he paid a nickel apiece fur the chickings, an' I wouldn't be su'prised ef he gave fifteen cents fur the old hen. An' all on them has gone an' lost theirselves. I seen the woman yistiday Pa bought 'em of. She's lettin' us have all the fowls we want, seein' we ain't got the farm any more, by way of pay on a coffing fur her mother-in-law. But I doubt ef the old lady is a-goin' to die. She comes of the Briggs stock, an' they was allus powerful contrary, every-one on 'em."

"But," gasped Ivera, "paying for—*for that*—before the person is dead!"

"Oh, she's a mighty forehanded woman. She gits a new hat every year—a Easter hat. She buys it along in fall when the flowers an' straw an' such is cheap. Then she gits it out an' wears it in spring before the shops here has got a bit of goods from St. Joe or Kansas City. She leads the

fashions—she do! She's forehanded all right. When her sister's husband lay sick, an' Eldridge said as how he couldn't get well, she yanked the sheets off'n his bed reel quick. 'Ef that's so,' she says, 'and I expect you're right, I got to git these rensed out now so they'll be ready fur the berryin', seein' they're my best pair.'"

"The invalid should have been complimented," Ivera ventured softly.

"I don't know as he was."

Mrs. McLelland's visitor experienced a hysterical desire to laugh. Was there no spiritual ozone in all the prairie atmosphere? The air seemed to reek of mortality. Her own tragic quest, the ghastly task she must instigate, the conversation of this prosperous and avaricious old woman—all were of death.

"I wonder," the girl hazarded, with a sort of defiant flippancy, "if she was particular to see the sheets were well aired."

Mrs. McLelland regarded her visitor



doubtfully a moment. The she laughed uproariously, and brought one uplifted hand down with force on the palm of the other.

"Land's sake! Fur fear he might git cold! That's a good one. I must tell Pa. Not that Pa's in the humor to face me now, seein' he's been acquisitin' of fowls that has been brung up like gypsies. I said yistiday to that woman who's so forehanded: 'How did that black hen look like what you sold Pa?' An' she reciprocates: 'It warn't a black hen. It were brown, an' had a white collar.' I told her I wouldn't have forgotten it ef I seen it, but Pa brought them onreliable fowls up after I'd retired. I never forget the look of a hen I seen onct—not ever in my life."

"Mrs. McLelland, may I come to board with you for a while?"

"Eh? Didn't Rob git back?"

"Yes."

"Full?"

Miss Lyle's dark blue eyes blazed.

"You may not ask me such questions or infer anything of the sort, Mrs. McLelland!"

"Lordy, I won't. What's the use of gettin' huffy about a few glasses, more or less? I didn't think on your bein' thin skinned, but most city folks is, I guess. Why, there was a city woman I knowed onct—the same that kep' talkin' about the view when my turkeys was a-comin' up the yard—an' she got real riled 'cause I said her daughter looked like she come of folks that was subject to epileptic fits."

Ivera laughed. "How absurd!" she said.

"Oh, but she did look thataway," Mrs. McLelland insisted, gravely.

"I mean how absurd of her mother to resent such a remark."

"Wan't it, though?" warmly. "Now, what are you willin' to pay fur board?"

"Oh, whatever you say. That doesn't matter."

"Would three dollars a week be about right?"

"Oh, five at least."

"No—three. We ain't Cresotes, as I told you, but it wouldn't be treatin' you with proper unanimity to take a cent more'n that. You can't eat more'n a dollar an' a half's worth a week I bet, if you was to try. That is to say," she ended doubtfully, "judgin' by the looks of you."

"May I have a cup of tea now, Mrs. McLelland?"

"What? Ain't you had any breakfast? An' it nigh onto ten o'clock!"

"I did not care for any when I left. And—and I walked in."

"Sakes alive, come in quick, an' set down! You're whiter'n my bleached tablecloth. Wait! Lay down on this sofy a bit. It's too narrer fur me, but I guess you can fit onto it. What took Rob to Omaha, anyhow?"

"He had trouble with a grain firm there about some corn that had been shipped."

Mrs. McLelland was lumbering around, brewing the tea and placing eatables on

the little table that was pushed up against the wall. "Them lads allus has lots of business to take 'em off," she avowed, with a knowing smile. "They got to git money, an' when they git it there's some of it disappears mighty quick I kin tell you. I suppose Prior'll be the next to go gallavantin'. It's most time fur him to git that insurance money."

"What insurance money?" Miss Lyle asked, idly. She was lying on the little hard sofa, watching the movements of her hostess. She was very tired. The warmth of the room was pleasant, the rest refreshing.

"The insurance he's goin' to git on the life of Mark Dudley. Do you like your tea biled more'n ten minutes?"

"On the life—" Ivera began faintly, and stopped. She was sitting straight up on the adamantine lounge, her startled gaze fixed on the face of the undertaker's wife.

"Yes. Didn't Rob tell you Prior has a insurance of five thousand dol-



lars comin' to him on the life of his partner? Oh, it's all fair enough, fur I see. Dudley suspicioned, I bet, he couldn't live long at the rate he was a-goin' it. Prior had helped him out of lots of his scrapes. Prior didn't git into scrapes himself. He ain't no hand fur hosses, or women, or whisky. He only cares fur money, an' fur them experiments he's allus at—Old Nick experiments I call 'em. So he stood by Dudley so often 't was only right Mark should git out insurance fur him. It's as broad as it's long to my notion. Here, drink your tea."

Miss Lyle found it difficult to swallow the bitter green decoction set before her.

Prior then was to benefit by Mark Dudley's death! Somehow she had not associated him with evil intention or act. How many were implicated in the tragedy she felt positive had occurred? She was deeply mystified—bewildered.

"You ain't got any appetite," Mrs.

McLelland remarked. "Well, I ain't got much myself since I received that turn about the preacher. Then it's very discommodin' to have a neighbor that don't approximate genteel conduct. Now, that little black-eyed Mis' Stebbins come a-dancin' in here last Sunday. She had enough vaniller on her handkerchief to scent a whole ice-cream sociable. She come bouncin' in thisaway!" Here Mrs. McLelland laboriously rose and treated her guest to a ponderous and practical illustration of Mrs. Stebbins' agility. "'I hear there's to be immersionin' in the crik,' I says to her, 'an' that you're goin' to become a Christian. Have you the proper sperit?' She tosses her head an' she laughs—this away! Ha—Ha—Ha! an' she says: 'I'm a-goin' to get a bath. My dress is perfectly bewitchin'. I guess the sperit Tom got fur me to take after the duckin' is good. 'Twas the best they had in the drug store.' 'The only speritool aid you'll need, onless you git a chill, is grace,' I restricted

her. 'Look at Regina Dickson. They had to break the ice to dip her, an' she never as much as sneezed after. She said as how the Lord went down with her.' That little snub-nose thing, she bust out laughin' in my face. 'Mebbe he did,' she says, 'but it was Hank Brooks come up with her!' You see Regina she slipped under the ice, an' was most drowned."

"Yes," murmured Ivera absently.

"There's Pa now," said Mrs. McLelland, as a dragging step sounded without. "Business is slack. I can allus tell by the way he walks. Pa's a bit lame, an' it seems like when trade is dull he limps more'n common. Pa," addressing the old man who entered, "is that Harper woman dead yet? She ain't, I s'pose," as Mr. McLelland shook his head mournfully.

"They do say the doctor gives hopes of her. He's a new doctor over from the county seat. He's a queer man, I understand—allus dreadful afraid he'll lose a case."

"Oh, Pa!" There was deprecation and sympathy in the exclamation.

"How do you do, Mr. McLelland?" said Ivera.

"It's Miss Lyle. Glad to see you, ma'm."

"Miss Lyle's goin' to board with us a spell, Pa. Wants to see some city life, I expostulate," the old lady said, laughing and winking.

Mr. McLelland was a thin, white-haired, white-bearded, rosy-cheeked old man. When a simple tiller of the soil his manner had been bluff and genial. Since assuming the important position of undertaker a change had come over him. His speech now indicated a calculating reserve, and from his mild blue eye a stern resentment gleamed on those too discouragingly robust to suggest near need of his services.

"You're from Chicago, Miss Lyle. Great place, Chicago."

"You are familiar with the city?"

"Oh, yes. I know all about Chicago. I've been there. I went there about

five year ago with hawgs. I seen the river, an' the street cars, an' a political parade. I started out to see the lake, but it was a good bit from the depot—seemed a good bit walkin' along in the shade of them big buildin's. So I let the lake slide. I made up my mind it would be there next trip."

"How long were you in the city?"

"Oh, a good while—nigh onto two days all told. I didn't calculate to stay more'n a hour or so, but there was such a heap to see I made up my mind to take the whole show in. What's the matter, Ma?" For Mrs. McLelland, fishing her teeth out of the water bucket with one hand, was making energetic motions behind her back with the other. She floundered around, wiping her wet hand on her apron.

"It's your progenitor, Pa. I seen him a-comin' just now through the slats of the cellar winder. Don't ask him to dinner, mind. There ain't nothin' but hard biled eggs, an' cheese, an'

mebbe as much fried potatoes—ef I git time to fry 'em—as would blind you.”

Ivera rose from the table. Her color had come back. Her eyes were alight with amusement.

“Who is he?” she asked.

“Sam Mahasby, the man I bought out,” explained Mr. McLelland. “How do, Sam?”

The man to whose business Mr. McLelland had succeeded was fat and florid. His hirsute appendages were sparse and straggly. He was drawling of speech, roving of eye, and idiotically amiable. He was duly presented to Miss Lyle. Miss Lyle talked to him. Indeed, she developed such unsuspected conversational ability, such wit, such fascination, that her host—forgetting the disappointing improvement in the condition of Mrs. Harper—sat and chuckled behind his white beard, and his thrifty wife poured sorghum instead of vinegar on the cold slaw she was preparing, and sat down in a tremor of helpless consternation

when she perceived her mistake. Mr. Mahasby beamed, and fidgeted, and laughed loudly, and stole a disturbed glance at his own reflection in the tin boiler on the stove, and decided to get a shave before he was a day older, and wished his boots were polished, and withal, in view of the apparent admiration of the young lady from the East, laid some flattering unction to his soul after the manner of his susceptible sex. When he finally dragged his reluctant feet to the threshold, remarking that he had a good four mile straight east to walk home, Miss Lyle decided that she would feel better for a saunter, and would go with Mr. Mahasby as far as the bluffs.

"Did you ever see the beat of that, Pa?" gasped Mrs. McLelland. But Pa had suddenly become misanthropic. "You can't never trust a woman to do what she's expected to," he returned, gloomily. "I wonder how Mis' Harper is gittin' along."

Meanwhile Ivera stepped daintily

along beside the burly ex-undertaker. He was talking. "Eldridge doctored him. I didn't know anything about the matter until Prior called me up about two in the morning, and told me to bring a coffin to the grain office right off. I asked what price. He swore at me. He said: 'Hang the price!'—only it wasn't hang he said. I went down there. Mr. Dudley lay on the lounge. I took his measurements. Then I went away. When I come back about five Mr. Prior and I put him in—the body, I mean. I went home to get a cup of coffee. When I come back Jardine and your brother was there with Prior. They berrid young Dudley over on the hill in Kansas. That's all I know about it. Was you acquainted with him?"

"Yes. It is growing colder, I think. Good-bye, Mr. Mahasby." She turned to go back to town. Mahasby stopped her.

"Would you have any objection," he asked, "to go buggy riding with

me? I'd like awful well to take you to the Litterary."

"Oh, thank you, no! It is very kind of you to think of it. But I couldn't. I don't go—anywhere."

"We—ll!" He looked at her admiringly. "You ain't got to, of course. But I never seen a lady I'd like so well to keep company with."

"I am sorry!"

"So'm I." He stood kicking the toe of one shoe against the heel of the other. "I guess I'll have to take up with Melinda Carberry. She's nice, but she ain't stylish. I like ladies I keep company with to be stylish. Well, so long!"

"Good-bye, Mr. Mahasby!"

She went back to McLelland's. Rob was waiting for her.

CHAPTER XV.

"I find myself a traitor with the rest."

—*King Richard II.*

HE came quickly to meet her. She noticed that he looked pale and agitated.

"See here, Ive, I call this a pretty mean way to treat a fellow. I had no idea you were going to desert me because I spoke hastily last night. I was—nervous. I know I said things I shouldn't. You'll come back with me, won't you?"

"No, wait a minute, Rob. I'm not saying this because I am offended or resentful. I determined to come and stay in town until all these harassing doubts concerning the fate of Mark were settled. These doubts become more complex, and press more heavily all the time. I am in a better position here to learn what I must know."

"What," he asked roughly, "put the idea in your head that there was anything wrong?"

"If I were to tell you, you would say a dream. Whether it was indeed a dream or a vision, or a telepathic summons I don't know—I never may know. Whatever it was—it brought me here."

He laughed grimly. "And I flattered myself you had come to visit me."

"You may remember I told you the morning after I arrived that I wished to come on account of Mark's death."

"I remember. But I could not connect your journey with an attempt so so—unconventional."

"Thank you. Unconventional is really a milder word than I have any right to expect."

"You have not discovered anything to justify your extraordinary suspicions?" He was looking searchingly down upon her.

"I have learned enough to make me resolute enough to learn more."

"I suppose there is nothing I can say that will induce you to give up this damned quixotic business?"

"Nothing. I must know the truth in this matter as soon as may be. Afterward, Rob," with a glimmer of a smile, "I'll go back and keep house for you if you want me."

"I shan't want you," he flung back hotly, "if you are bound to make our name common talk for every cursed corn-shucker in the country!"

Involuntarily, she took a step backward. Then she said with gentleness: "Oh, there is no fear of that. Good-bye for the present, Rob." She turned toward McLelland's.

"Good-bye, forever, as far as I care," Rob Lyle muttered angrily. He swung off down the street and went into the grain office. It was untenanted. He passed into the small room in the rear. A cot bed stood in one corner. Otherwise the place was arranged as a rude sort of laboratory. Prior, fitting a wire into a hollow glass tube, looked up

angrily as Lyle dashed in. He condoned his scowl by a nod, when he saw who it was.

"Come in, Rob. Shut the door. I've been wanting to see you."

"You knew where to find me."

"I got a check from the insurance company yesterday," Prior remarked.

"Keep it!" Rob advised, briefly.

Prior laid down the wire he had been manipulating, and took his thin knee into the clasp of his bony hands. "You don't want any of it?"

"Not a red."

"You went into the deal," Prior reminded him, "exactly on the same ground I did."

"Not by a damn sight, I didn't!" Lyle corrected him. "I went in on the same ground poor Mark did. We both were your dupes. He pays a higher penalty than I—but mine is severe enough, God knows! How could we guess at the risks you were willing to run—at the extent of your infernal

schemes? I tell you what, Prior, I feel like a murderer every day I live."

He was sitting on the side of the cot, his soft felt hat twisted between his fingers, his attitude and expression indicative of profound depression. Prior grinned across at him.

"Oh, I wouldn't feel that way about it!"

"Wouldn't!" jeered the boy miserably. "You couldn't!" Prior looked at him keenly. "There's a revival in town. Have you been getting religion?"

"Getting nothing."

"Then you'd better change your mind and take a couple of thousand," Prior facetiously suggested.

Lyle pulled his hat into shape. "Stick to your blood money," he advised, moodily.

"Blood money? Man, it isn't that!"

Lyle kicked the door shut as some men came into the office, and began to talk about the advance on corn. "No" he said, "it's worse by a bucketful."

There was a silence. Then Prior asked: "See here, what's got into you?"

"Decency maybe."

"Has your sister been prodding your conscience on this subject?" Rob stood up and walked over to Prior. Lyle was slenderly built, but he was athletic and had well-trained muscles. At least Prior thought so, after Rob had taken him up, and shaken him, and set him down again. In that space the walls rocked and closed in around him.

"We won't talk about my sister," Rob decided.

He went out into the office and examined the books, while Prior got back his breath and lost some of his color. Jennings waddled in. He was in ranch costume—at least in the kind of a costume London tailors deem adapted to life on the plains. His ocher-hued corduroys tightly covered his stout legs. His short coat was trimly belted. His large felt hat was adorned with gold braid and a gold buckle. His high boots

were of color and texture foreign to any ever seen in the West.

"Well met!" he cried cordially. "I intended going out to call on Miss Lyle to-night. May I trouble you to mention the fact that I am coming?"

"She is visiting in town—at McLelland's."

"The undertaker's? Dear me! There are no social distinctions in this country, are there? Absolutely none. Well, I shall call."

Call he did that very night. He was fluent, rosy, friendly, impressionable, and arrayed as Solomon in all his glory never remotely dreamed of being appaled.

After that his visits were frequent. At first Ivera enjoyed them, but as his hope became evident to her, she wished devoutly that he could be banished, without an actual edict. One evening she sat knitting a scarf for Mrs. McLelland. Jennings, in an optimistic ecstasy, watched her. The best room was duly and dimly illumined by a kerosene

lamp, that had red flannel in its glass bowl, and rested on a crocheted mat of colored wools. The room, with its horsehair furniture and ingrain carpet, was trim, clean, comfortless. The only decorations were tidies—"drapes" the Bubbleites called them. They hung on chair backs, and enfolded the family Bible, and swayed in limp elegance from the frame of the solitary picture, and dangled from the rigid sofa pillows. "Yes," said Mr. Jennings, as if continuing a conversation, "there are no end of lovely girls in England."

"So I understand," returned Miss Lyle demurely.

"You've never been abroad?"

"Not since I was a child."

"That," promptly and adroitly, "must have been only yesterday."

"Oh, it is several years back, I assure you. I was three years at school in Belgium."

"But you don't know old England?"

"Very slightly."

"I should like to show it you—Lon-

don, and all the best of it, you know."

"Including the lovely girls?" The needles glittered in her slim, flying fingers.

"There's not one of them," ardently, "who could hold a candle to you—not one."

Miss Lyle's dark lashes lifted. She flashed him a glance of sweet incredulity. "You flatterer! she murmured. "Oh, indeed, no!" Jennings cried. He pushed his chair farther away from the stove, and mopped his glowing forehead with a huge square of monogrammed cambric. "To be exact, I have never seen any lady who could be compared to you—not even the Queen of England!"

There! The treasonable truth was out!

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" cried Ivera Lyle. She laughed delightedly. "I should think not!"

"No," Jennings gravely insisted, "I wouldn't mention Her Majesty in the same breath with you."

"Mr. Jennings!"

The tone of reproof entranced him.

"I know it isn't exactly right for me to speak in this way—and I've always been a loyal subject, Miss Lyle. But I can't think it is er—er—wicked in this case, to transfer allegiance from one sovereign to another!"

Across the mesh of black wool she held Miss Lyle gazed at him with sparkling eyes.

"You have certainly kissed the blarney stone, Mr. Jennings!"

"No," Jennings contradicted seriously, "I didn't, although when I was in Ireland I visited the spot with that intention. But I found to do so I would be obliged to allow myself to be suspended in mid-air by the heels. I couldn't—oh—I really couldn't, you know, consent to appear in such an—undignified position." The thought of Mr. Jennings frantically acquiring sweetness of tongue in the attitude mentioned sent Miss Lyle into a fit of laughter that she struggled vainly to control.

Mr. Jennings smiled broadly in sympathy, and congratulated himself on his powers of entertaining.

"Of course," he said, reverting to the question of his preference for Ivera, "Her Majesty in one way suffers in comparison to you. She—"

"Only," with an innocent glance, "in one way?"

Jennings squirmed on his slippery seat. "Well,—er—there are other—differences. What I was about to mention was the matter of age. Her Majesty is older, you know."

"Oh, not so much," Miss Lyle answered, her eyes bent on her work, "only about half a century or more."

"That's so!" he assented, brightening. "Sometimes half a century is quite a good while, and then again it isn't. I can't fancy a fellow finding it long if," very valiantly indeed, "he had the beatitude of spending it with you!"

The needles in Miss Lyle's white fingers interlaced with wonderful quick-



ness. "Oh, one would never be blessed in my society, Mr. Jennings!"

"I'm sure I should be," protested Peter. He furtively loosened his necktie, and flapped his handkerchief in his shining face. He felt that he was getting on famously.

"That," Miss Lyle said severely, "is because you have no idea what a ter-magant I am."

"I like to be abused," avowed Peter, humbly.

The dimples deepened in the pink velvet of Miss Lyle's cheeks. "Even Rob couldn't endure me," she declared.

"How I wish you would—"

"Oh, Mr. Jennings, please bring me that runaway ball!"

Peter promptly sprawled after the rolling sphere of black yarn. He secured it under the sofa, and returned it to Miss Lyle. He was redder than ever from the exertion. Even his heavy hands, with their blunt finger-tips and square, polished nails, were blushing.

"Thank you. That ball has the

most insane preference for escaping, and for eluding capture. It led you quite a chase."

"Oh, I'm being led a worse chase than that," broke out Peter, desperately, And then he added, "By you!"

The girl made a little protesting gesture.

But Peter was not to be held longer in check. "I'm well off," he blurted on. "At least my father is well off, and I'll come in for everything."

"That is a pleasant certainty."

"Isn't it, though?" he cried, beamingly. "Now, there's Jardine. I don't believe he'll ever get another penny from his people. They staked him a couple of times before he came out here."

"You knew Mr. Jardine in England?"

"Y—es. Not intimately. My father held a—er—a position, under his father. Of course, I can't expect any girl to admire—I mean to fancy—me, who knows Jardine. He isn't as young as he might be, and he dresses most

abominably, but somehow there's an air about him—I daresay you've noticed it," he faltered, breaking off in deep dejection,

"I don't know Mr. Jardine well," Ivera said, coldly.

"Is that so?" Jennings cried, joyously. "I thought—it was quite absurd of course, but I thought you and he were such friends! I know he is cleverer than I—and some would think *lots* better looking. But—well, he couldn't think more of *you*, Miss Lyle. I haven't run through a couple of fortunes, and I don't have to work to get money now, and—er—and I—why, I adore you, Miss Lyle! That's just the word for it. I adore you!"

Ivera tossed her knitting on a chair, and stood up. "I am so sorry you have spoken, Mr. Jennings. It was all my fault. I should have stopped you. But I did not think you really cared. I wonder if you will forgive me?"

He looked down at the sweet, penitent face.

“There is not any hope for me, then?”

She slowly shook her head.

“But you are sure you don’t care for Jardine?”

“I don’t care for any man—in that way!” she cried passionately. She thought of the grave on the wind-swept hill. “Not for anyone!” she repeated.

CHAPTER XVI.

"How oft to-night
Have my old feet stumbled at graves!"

—*Romeo and Juliet.*

A BITTER January night. The wind had ceased snarling, but the frozen snow crackled, and there was something uncanny about the gray light that filled the gap between the sky and prairie. The theatrical troupe of a patent medicine company held forth in town that night. As it was a "free show" many horses were hitched along the streets. No attention was paid to one belated wagon rattling south. Those in the Grand Opera House were listening to the wit of the strangers with eyes and ears and open mouths. The men in the Owl-King saloon, brimming with whisky and hilarity, kept their revolvers popping at a certain mark, and roared appro-

val or derision as the shot struck or flew wide. Two men sat on the box of the spring wagon. Past the yellow gleam from the last window pane, across the railroad track, around a curve, under towering cottonwoods, over a wooden bridge spanning the state line dividing Nebraska from Kansas, the horses sped. When up a steep hill and on level ground again, the driver turned to the right. He drove out on what was apparently a stretch of barren prairie, but the jolting over low mounds, and the upright boards revealed by a lantern flickering ahead of them, proved they were in a graveyard.

"This here's the one." said a cautious voice.

McLelland, holding the lantern, had approached the wagon. The men jumped out. They took spades, shovels, pickaxes, out of the back of the wagon, went to work. A couple of other men who had walked up the hill joined those by the grave. They talked

with McLelland a few minutes. The latter hobbled away into the shadow where a little black figure was standing. "The men you saw over at the county seat are here. They say if there is any doubt about his being buried here at all, it would be better to open the coffin right now. We can take it up town later if—he's in it, you know."

"Very well," replied Ivera Lyle.

When she had appealed to the county authorities for permission to disinter the body, she had met with many objections. Chemical analysis would be practically out of the question at this date. If the man had really died of virulent diphtheria, the exposure of the remains would be fraught with danger to the living.

"If violence were responsible?" she had asked.

"We have no reason for supposing anything of the sort."

She offered other arguments—inducements. She was young, beautiful,

wealthy. Perhaps the latter fact proved most potent in prevailing. At any rate, it was with the sanction and in the presence of the authorities, that the grave under the ostentatious headstone was finally opened. Now, save for the sound of the striking pick, the shuffling feet, the frozen clods flung from the spades, there was silence on the hill. Below, the scattered lights of the town showed dull and distant.

How long Ivera Lyle stood there listening, waiting, she never knew. She was roused by McLelland speaking to her. "Come," he said.

She shuddered back, "Tell me," she entreated.

"Come," he said again. "There is nothing to fear."

She moved mechanically forward. She found herself standing beside a deal box. The lid of the coffin inside had been unscrewed—removed. She looked down. She saw a long, brown, canvas bag, which had been ripped

open. It was filled with excelsior and stones. That was all.

"Look out," a man cried, flashing up the glare of a lantern in her face. "The lady is fainting."

"No—no," she murmured. "Mr. McLelland, will you take me back now?"

The old man helped her into a buggy, and they drove home in silence. The town was dark and still. There was a veiled light in the billiard hall. Before the doctor's office, Eldridge, with a medicine case in his hand, was scrambling on horseback.

Mrs. McLelland, enormous, shapeless and toothless, in her stocking feet, and shaking with suspense, opened the door for her husband and Miss Lyle.

"Well?" she questioned.

"The coffin was empty. An' say, Ma, you never did see the like of the way that linin' had changed color. An' Mahasby must have charged a bigger profit than I do, too."

"Oh, Pa. You raise the price to as

much as your progenitor charged. Don't let anyone sophisticate you like that. Miss Lyle, I bet you feel good that Mr. Dudley ain't dead after all. But where is he, is what I want to know. Sakes, you must be sick. I never see anyone look so. Pa, you get her a taste of that Composition tea. Its very inoculatin' when you git a turn. I b'lieve I'd have fainted plum away that day Mis' Stebbins gave me such a collapse about the preacher a-goin' to investigate me, ef I hadn't swallered a couple of sups right quick. Things will come out all right, my dear, an' ef they don't, we all got to have some reservation to the inimitable."

Miss Lyle, smiling a little at the comforting reflection of her hostess, went up the stairs with light, lagging step.

Morning came, clear, calm, ominously quiet. Not a shred of withered grass moved anywhere, not a bare branch stirred. Mrs. McLelland was

making soap. A neighbor had dropped in. The smell of hot grease and lye came up between the loose boards of the floor. Ivera could hear the talk of the women. The petty gossip, the unwarrantable inferences, the uncharitable suppositions, oppressed and hurt her. She put on her wraps and slipped out, turned north. Soon she was on an unfamiliar road, walking rapidly. Suddenly she became conscious of a deadly chilliness in the air. She turned hastily to retrace her steps. The cold increased—a most appalling cold. It penetrated her fur-lined coat, and seemed to pierce the marrow of her bones. The low-lying Nebraska sky hung nearer than ever. She fancied that she could almost put up her hand and touch it, as if it were a tangible object. Then she became aware that it was snowing fast, fine, thick, dense, blinding snow. She hurried back along the road she had come, but found she could not see ahead for the white wall that closed in, before—around her.

Was this bitter whiteness snow? She had always thought of snow as soft, gentle, tender. This that assailed her was icy, and so sharp it stung like flying particles of metal where it touched her face. The wind that had sprung up blew from every quarter, east, west, north, south. It commingled, shrieked, and swirled, and eddied the falling snow into a thousand fantastic drifts and spirals. Around a little dark, struggling figure, that wild whiteness surged and revolved. Ivera Lyle was strong and brave of heart, but many a man perished in that memorable blizzard. On, she would keep on, she told herself *she would* keep going. It could not last forever. She must come on the town soon. But only to be able to see—*anything*. If she could only make out the fences, or the shape of a dwelling, or a landmark of any kind. Close to her eyes was the whirling snow—only the snow. A few steps more. Surely she was moving in the right direction. In any case she must keep in motion. It

were death to surrender. But the cold! She had never imagined such cold. It went through her body like sword thrusts. Her feet ached with the agony of it. Her hands hung numb. The very sight seemed freezing in her eyes. Still she battled on—buffeted on. But suddenly she stumbled, stood still. She could go no further. The snow was no longer white. It had become a prismatic thing, violet, yellow, crimson. It must be growing warmer. The awful pain of the cold was passing from her. She felt all at once oppressed with fatigue. A delicious drowsiness weighed her eyelids down. She must rest—sleep.

“Ivera. Oh, my dear, my dear!” She heard the cry through a mist—a thick, white mist. Then a coat was wrapped around her, she was lifted into a vehicle, and she knew no more until she found herself looking at the plastered walls of Mrs. McLelland’s spare bedroom, and the bright patchwork quilt on Mrs. McLelland’s spare bed.

"Have I been sick?" she asked.

"I dunno as you can rightly call it sick," Mrs. McLelland responded.

"You had been pretty nigh froze to death. You went off a-gallavantin' with a blizzard a-comin' up, an' you got caught in it—that's what you done. Mr. Jardine, he see you a-crossin' the hill, and he come here to find out ef you was back. When I reciprocated that you warn't he tore off like a incompatible creature. 'Twas a good thing he found you. That was a full week ago."

"Has Rob been here?"

"Lord—yes. They all been here. That silly Moll Chourka a-walkin' in to know ef you was dyin', an' that there tomato-colored Mr. Jennings a-a-settin' in my parlor, and a-rockin' hisself in my rocker, an' a-droppin' tears on my red plush album that he was purtendin' to be circumventin'. Oh, they was all here—yes."

"I'm dreadfully sorry you've had so much trouble."

"Oh, I don't call it trouble, but it seems like everything counts. I've been a good deal roused one way an' another. Hogs is down to 2.35, an' them Pa was savin' to ship won't bring much."

"That is too bad."

"An'," despondingly, "that there Harper woman ain't dead yet."

"Well!"

"About the worst of all is what happened Susanna. Pa, he went and killed her."

"Killed—who?"

"Susanna—my old cat, you know. I hadn't no cat when I moved here from Illinois. I felt reel friendless till the grocer give me one. She was a most beautiful cat, white with a yellowish cast about her. An' that polite. I never see a cat so polite an' generous. She'd bring a mouse an' put it right down at my feet. She wouldn't offer to tech it till I'd say 'Help yourself, Susanna!' After a while she become affiliated with a sore head. Did you

ever have a cat that had a sore head?"

Miss Lyle failed to recall having possessed a feline so afflicted.

"It wasn't nice," she said, in placid retrospection, letting her elephantine proportions creak back in the chair.

"Folks who were not strong to their stummicks objected. Pa, not wantin' to hurt my feelin's, would perspicuously go out when Susanna come in. Often cold evenin's when Pa 'ud go out I used to git down the black bottle from the clock shelf, an' make myself a bit of Composition Tea, which is warmin' and soothin', but which Pa is kinder close of. Susanna kep gettin' worse an' Pa he stayed out'n doors a good deal—I had her in a box behind the stove. One night he came in with chillblains. 'Ef you'll bile a drop of water, Maria,' he says, 'I'll see ef I kin swaller a few sups of Composition Tea.' With that he reaches up behind the clock, an' I felt my heart a-scrambulatin' all over my buzzum.

"'What's this?' he says. 'There

ain't none.' "Pa,' I says, 'you bein' out'n the house so much evenin's, an' me tending Susanna alone, I got reel run down. I got chills. I had to take Composition Tea occasional to keep off par—paresis.'

"'What's that?' asks Pa, lookin' at the empty bottle, an' then at me. 'It's somethin' I've read about in the papers.' I says; 'it comes from menial aggravation and general probability of the system. An' what with Susanna—'

"'But Pa cut me short there. 'See here, Maria,' he says, 'Susanna might be kep' comfortable by a family as owned a drugstore. But ef tendin' Susanna is goin' to cause you to use up a quart of Composition Tea in ten days, I'm thinkin' she'd better be put where she won't be givin' folks the latest fashion in complaints.' I see how put out Pa was, so I offered to git him some of the catnip tea I'd been givin' Susanna in her milk, but he retaliated my kindness. Nex' mornin' what should I see but Pa, when he

thought I was busy sewin' carpet rags, a-climbin' the fence with suthin' under each arm. Cold water began to drizzle down my back. I run to Susanna's box. It was empty—but I knowed it would be, fur I missed the aroma before I seen Susanna had departed. I felt like the man in the song who seen the valley smilin' before him where lately he left her behind, but I knowed I couldn't ketch up to Pa to abstract his attention from Susanna. When he come home I never said beans. The nex' mornin' when I poured his coffee, I was silent as the minx. His dinner was settin' on the table when he come home at noon, an' I seen he was a-watchin' me. Supper was the same way. Oh, it was reel onpleasant to to make him squirm, but I had to complicate my pride that Pa's action had prodded."

"It must have been hard for you," Ivera murmured.

"It were. It were hard fur Pa, too. By'n by, 'Maria,' he says. I looks at

him. 'Ef you git me the quart bottle,' he says, meek-like, 'I'll go down and git it filled with Composition Tea.' 'Yes, Pa,' I says, jumpin' up quick fur fear he'd change his mind. 'An' I don't bear you malice, Pa, though you don't need to think that I hadn't a presentation in my mind of what you was goin' to do, when I see you straddlin' the fence with Susanna under one arm, an' a gun under the other.' I had the kettle bilin' when he got back, an' the Composition Tea was reel soothin'—but I miss Susanna."

The next day, as Ivera sat in a wooden chair by the kitchen stove, there was a knock at the back door. Mrs. McLelland had gone down town. Ivera called, "Come in!" Jack Jardine opened the door. He half drew back—then came forward. He was roughly clad in corduroy and leather. His high boots were splashed with mud. He stood, hat in hand, his gaze bent full upon her.

"You are better," he said. "That is good."

"I hear I owe my life to you, Mr. Jardine."

"That is nonsense. I happened along—and drove you here. That is all."

There was a silence. He found himself noticing that the ribbons on her gown matched her eyes.

Suddenly she spoke of the subject he abhorred. "Do you know that I had Mark Dudley's grave opened?"

"No, I did not know."

He had himself very well in hand, she decided. "You are aware of what we found in the coffin, Mr. Jardine?"

He bowed. Again that palpitant silence came between them. "Will you tell me," she implored, "*Where* is Mark Dudley?"

That high bred face of his with its fine features, its luminous hazel eyes, all at once looked aged—hardened.

"Ask your brother," he commanded.

"Rob—" The word was uttered in supreme amazement.

"Rob—yes." One stride across the

small space intervening brought him to her side. He grasped her hand with a fierce grip.

“Why will you be so cruel? You know—you must know that I love you better than anything on earth or in heaven. I’m not blaming you for my folly. One might as well blame a rose for being a rose. Good-bye.”

CHAPTER XVII.

"For here's a paper written in his hand."

—*Much Ado About Nothing.*

"YOU better wrap up warm ef you got your mind sot on goin' down to answer that," advised Mrs. McLeland. "It's the kind of day I despise. It ain't a-thawin' thinner nor a-freezing solider. Seem like it's standin' still. An' the snow over on them bluffs has peeled off in patches like frostin' that's ett off'n a plum cake. You'll git back in time fur dinner? Pa ain't home. He's gone to see about buryin' that Harper woman, who has ceased opposin' her will to her Maker's, an' gone from this vale of tears like a obedient Baptist should. Her son an' Pa picked out a coffin the linin' of which will be most becomin' to a woman with reddish hair. You know Pa keeps

coffings of all sizes and denominations. I'll wait to cook till you come, fur I do allus say it's fearful frivolous eatin' alone. Don't you go huntin' another blizzard, now!"

"I shan't," Ivera smilingly promised as she went out. She walked down to the depot. A familiar boyish figure lounging along the platform caught her eye. She went hastily up to him.

"Rob! I'm so glad to meet you. I was wondering how I could send you word that I am going back. I must leave to-morrow."

He had turned, courteous but frowning. The cloud on his handsome, youthful face vanished as she spoke.

"You are really going back, I've?"

She drew a yellow envelope from the pocket of her coat—gave it to him. He glanced through the inclosure. "It does seem imperative," he commented.

"Oh, it is. Uncle James always said there would be trouble about the validity of those deeds when the case

came up in the courts. I must be there personally to testify. You don't seem sorry to lose me, Rob?"

"Well, you know what came between us."

"Yes—I know. And I was right."

He looked at her sharply. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I was right in my wild conjecture. There has been 'villany somewhere—Whose?' I had the grave opened, as you probably heard—" She observed how violently he started. "What! You had not heard it? What was committed to that grave, Rob, in deceit was returned in mockery."

"My God, Ive! I say, what a girl you are! Now that you have discovered Mark is alive, you are satisfied."

"Why should I be? Besides, how do I know he is alive? I only know he does not lie below the monument which bears his name. The next thing is to learn where he is—alive or dead. I asked Mr. Jardine to tell me. He told me to ask you."

Rob's delicate features flushed with rage.

"Confound Jardine! I never saw Mark Dudley after he left this town. Jardine has seen him since. Let it drop, I've, like a good girl. It's a cursed business from first to last. It is better you should know no more—believe me, it is better. You will be happier all the days of your life if you will let the matter rest."

She had never known him speak so earnestly—with so much emotion. Their eyes met.

"I must let it rest, as you say, for the present. I shall go East to-morrow. But, of course, I will come back. I have gone too far to surrender now."

He laughed—a laugh of relief. "'Sufficient for the day is the good resolution thereof!' You will meet a Prince Charming who will never let you come back to this God-forgotten country."

He opened the door of the waiting-

room for her. She smiled and shook her head as she passed in.

"Hold on!" Rob entreated. "You don't care for Mark yet—do you, Ive?"

She stood still. She felt oddly thrilled. She was trembling. She looked back at her brother—in silence.

"That's right, dear!" he said, with more heartiness and affection than he usually showed. "He wasn't worthy of you. It won't hurt him now to say that, and it may do you some good to remember it. I'll be in to-morrow. I'll go as far as Lincoln with you."

There was quite a gathering at the depot to see Miss Lyle off. A few women she had come to know appeared, also half a dozen impressionable men. Evidently she had not been blotted from the adaptable heart of Mr. Mahasby by the charms of Miss Melinda Carberry, for he was present in a condition of more imbecile amiability than usual. Jennings, in his finest London suit, wearing gloves and necktie of a mournful heliotrope, es-

thetically expressive of woe, stalked up and down the farther part of the platform, aloof and inconsolable. A whistle sounded. The train swerved around a distant curve, and swept down the rails that glittered blue in the sunshine. Ivera Lyle, the center of a small, exclamatory group, gave one fleeting look at the graveyard on the hill, and then glanced back at the stout little man, pacing solitary and forlorn. She broke away from the others and went up to him. She held out her hand.

"Good-bye, Mr. Jennings. Keep a kind thought for me even if I don't deserve it."

Her slim fingers lay in his thick, tight hold. He looked at her with a little blinking eyes that threatened to brim over.

"I may write to you?" he begged.

"If," quizzically, "you promise to be reticent on one subject."

"I will be—as long as I can."

Then the train rushed in. The hand-

shaking was over. Rob helped his sister on board. The cars rumbled out.

"Queer Jardine never showed up," Rob ventured, as they drew near the next station. "He looked downright feazed when I told him in the Owl-King last night that you were leaving to-day. Hallo! Who is that, riding like the devil?"

A man on horseback was galloping down the main street of the little town ahead. He reached the depot, sprang from his horse, and flung the basket he carried to the conductor as the train pulled out. The conductor came into the car.

"I guess," he volunteered with the easy assurance of Western train men, "this is for your lady friend, Rob."

Lyle opened the basket. It was filled with cut flowers, geraniums, myrtles, carnations, double petunias. Nothing rare or costly—merely the poor best of a prairie greenhouse at the season.

"What a fool that fellow is!" Rob remarked, disgustedly. "He had to

ride thirty miles to-day to get you this truck!"

"If the basket is mine, be good enough to pass it over. And I do object to hearing flowers called truck."

The first act of Robert Lyle, when he returned to Bubble, was to tell Prior that he wished the partnership formally dissolved as soon as possible. To this Prior cheerfully consented. He was sick of the infernal country anyhow, he said.

Two weeks passed. Lyle stayed pretty steadily at the farm, and devoted himself to his neglected work. Jennings sometimes rode out in the evening for a smoke and a chat. He liked to sit in the room that bore traces of her occupancy. He found a vicarious pleasure in the companionship of her brother. His depression was profound. Apart from the absence of the girl he worshiped, the dilemma which confronted him rendered him melancholy. After many unsuccessful attempts to

indite a letter to Ivera he went to Jardine, and threw himself upon the mercies of that unsympathetic individual.

"It isn't," he confided to Jack, "that I can't spell, or write a good hand. It isn't even that I fall down on grammar sometimes. I'd make a stagger at that. It is that I don't understand lots of things she cares about, and even if I did I could not write the way some fellows do—catchingly, cleverly, you know."

"I know," Jack said, grimly. He had read some of Peter's epistolary attempts.

"Now, what I want to ask," said Jennings, "is this: Will you write my letters for me?"

It was the first time Peter had ever seen his partner excited. The latter was sitting smoking, one leg flung over the corner of the table. He took his pipe from his mouth, and stared at Jennings.

"Good God, no!" he exclaimed.

Peter's round, red face took on an

aggrieved expression. "Why won't you?"

"Why," crisply, "should I?"

"Because you care nothing for the girl, and I'm dead in love with her. You didn't as much as show up at the train to see her off. Even that brute, Mahasby, was there. Because she's far and away the smartest girl I ever met, and she doesn't know I'm a fool. I don't want her to find out the fact, if I can help it. She is bound to make the discovery if I write to her. I know I've got nerve, as you Westerners say, to ask it, but it means a lot to me. Be a good fellow, Jardine! Write and let me copy your letters!"

Jardine called to his memory the timid little maiden in Sussex, and his heart beat no faster. Then he thought of the Eastern girl with the tawny hair, and the dark blue eyes, and the quaint, pretty name, and he said, brusquely, "You must be crazy, Jennings!"

"She's nothing to you," Peter insisted, sturdily.

Jardine laughed as he emptied his pipe, and refilled it with his long, brown fingers. He admired the persistence of the fellow immensely.

"Look here," he said, as he drew a match across his boot sole, "if I were—mind, I only say *if* I were to write those letters, I should have to know the contents of hers—supposing she replied. She might not like that."

"I wish to heaven she cared!" groaned Jennings. "She only consented to allow me to write to her on condition I wouldn't allude to one subject—well, you see, I'd been making a fool of myself."

"Oh, I understand. In that case, I'll do it," Jardine decided, briskly.

Jennings jumped up. His smile revealed his large white teeth.

"You're a brick, Jardine!"

"Oh, hang it, wait a while," Jack counseled. "I may make a fizzle of the deal."

But he did not make a fizzle of it. The correspondence was tremendously

successful. Jennings was delighted with the letters he mailed, and the replies he received. Indeed Jardine was somewhat enthusiastic himself. His personal vanity stimulated him. He determined Ivera Lyle should look for and appreciate his letters, even if they were copied, signed, and sent by Peter Jennings.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"The rest is silence,"

—*Hamlet.*

"IT isn't half a bad thing that folly is sometimes its own reward," Jack remarked once to his partner.

He had just finished a letter to Ivera, and was well satisfied with the production. Peter stared at him, twisted the big cornelian ring on his finger, smiled a smile that was at once lenient and uncomprehending, and the subject was dropped.

Miss Lyle had found it necessary, in the supervision of the estate she had inherited, to go to New York, but her replies to the letters from Nebraska continued to come regularly. She wrote much of plays, books, people, artistic happenings. Her letters brought much pleasure to Jack Jardine, some embarrassment to Peter Jennings.

Still, there were times when the latter mailed a particularly brilliant letter, that he felt a personal pride in it. He looked approvingly at the clerkly hand on the envelope. It was not every man who could send letters which such a bright girl as Ivera Lyle would enjoy. For Ivera had confessed she read his missives with admiration. Thus, temporarily, he thrust Jardine out of sight. But after a while his flattering imagination failed to content him. It was not the pleasantest thing in the world to turn over Ivera's latest letter to Jardine, and watch the smile of his partner as he read it. And there was scant solace in seeing Jack reply to it, his emphatic pen speeding over the paper, his hazel eyes lighting or glooming with the mood of the matter he discussed. For Jack wrote in a style that did credit to Exeter College, and the vagrant, delightful existence he had known. He was quite as gay, cynical, adroit and illogical as any woman could desire. With the growing interest of Jardine



in the correspondence the perplexity of Jennings increased. He wondered sometimes in futile bewilderment what they were talking about. Their references puzzled him. Their ironies irritated him. Their subtleties confused him. As for Jack, he began to count and to live, one by one, the days that must elapse before a reply could be reasonably expected, and to betray a warm welcome for Peter when he appeared with it. The sight of that delicate, defiant, distinctive chirography set his pulses tingling. He knew, apart from the personal association the letter conveyed, what a feast it was sure to prove. Not one girl in a thousand could write like that! Such airy earnestness, such gentle humor, such piquant description, such gracious womanliness, and the unconscious pathos with which she wrote of homely things, made him think of dew on burdock leaves.

It was May. The terrible heat of summer in the desert had begun. Daily

great white clouds of dust were blowing from the south. Peter continued to receive at intervals the faintly fragrant missives that took five days to come from their starting place on the Atlantic coast, to turn them over to Jardine, when he had read their contents, and to copy and send their prompt replies. In a vague, impotent way, Peter felt that every letter he sent and every reply he received tended to draw Ivera Lyle and Jack Jardine closer together, and to cast him into outer darkness. One evening his dumb dissatisfaction reached a climax. He was pulling up his horse before the shop in which the postoffice was located, when Jack Jardine came out.

"There's no letter for you," he said.

Jennings blustered out an oath. "I'd like to know who commissioned you to ask for my mail?" he cried, angrily. He stood his ground, although Jack looked at him in that magnificent way of his that always made Peter feel like apologizing for the fact of his existence.

"I'll thank you," he supplemented, still fuming, "not to meddle with my letters."

"I meant to have saved you the trouble of calling," Jack replied, coldly. "You may be sure that after this I shall take no interest in your personal affairs."

They separated, each feeling rather proud of himself. Elation was still uppermost with Peter when, on the following day, he received a letter from Ivera Lyle. He decided to answer it. He would have her all to himself for the first time. He wondered why he had ever been so foolish as to make that absurd request of Jardine. He set bravely to work. He found the task a difficult one. He attempted to imitate Jardine's style—and failed. Then the subjects she wrote on were sealed mysteries to him. What did he know about Dvorak's Slavonic dances? What did he understand about Tree's portrayals? What significance had Konchil's latest impressionistic aqua-

relle for him? He would ignore these matters. He would say he was writing hastily. He would regretfully mention that their usual fascinating discussion must be postponed. But—he could not say this every time. The awful possibility occurred to him that Jardine, missing the pleasure of reading the letters, might start up a correspondence on his own account. The similarity of thought would suggest, perhaps reveal, the deception practiced. Then Ivera would despise him—Peter Jennings! There was only one way to win security—to again request Jack's aid. He felt there was no danger of Jack betraying his confidence. He was in a cold sweat when he ran out to saddle the mare. He found his partner sitting in the rear of his shack, reading and smoking.

"I was provoked yesterday," Jennings apologized. "Let us go on about those letters as we have been doing."

Jardine began to curse his partner with much energy, but the day was

dull, his novel was stupid, and the square white envelope looked tempting. He held out his hand for it. Jennings deposited himself on the discarded seat of an old wagon. He fidgeted, bit his nails, started to speak, thought better of it, and lapsed into a condition of envious scrutiny. Jardine's countenance evinced as much interest in the pages he was skimming as if they contained the statistics of Transylvania.

"Would you mind answering that letter now?" Peter broke in. Jardine returned the envelope with an air of profound indifference. He was telling himself how fortunate it was he had not engaged himself to that girl in Sussex. Then he thought of Mark Dudley, and decided it didn't matter much after all. He took a pencil out of his vest pocket and began to scribble the date on the fly-leaf of his book.

"The usual thing, I suppose," he said, carelessly.

"No," Peter replied, quickly. "Not the usual thing at all." Then as Jar-

dine pushed back his hat and looked at him, he stammered: "I want you to write and—and ask her to marry me."

Jardine suddenly found the sun too hot. He went into the house, and Peter followed.

"You asked her that," Jack reminded him, "before she left." This, he reflected, was a task he had not bargained for.

"I know that," assented Peter, breathing hard. "We were not so well acquainted then, though. Besides, she gave me a certain amount of encouragement when she permitted me to write at all, and in answering my letters."

A smile came around the corners of Jardine's mouth. "But that permission was given—I understood you to say—on condition you would not again declare your devotion. The restriction holds good."

"I think not. We know each other so much better now. It seems so anyway, since we have been corresponding."

"Quite so!" agreed Jack, gravely. But the next instant he had burst into a sudden peal of laughter—spontaneous, ecstatic.

"Now, what the devil are you laughing at?" Jennings demanded.

"Oh, nothing. Just a ridiculous idea. So you wish me to write your proposal? Shall it be very fervent?" He was striving with all his might to keep from another outbreak of mirth. Jennings adjusted his massive cuff-links, and eyed his partner suspiciously. He must get through with this matter—and he was at the mercy of Jardine.

"Write," he advised, with an adroitness upon which he flattered himself, "as you would write yourself to the girl you desired to make your wife."

Jardine nodded. He no longer experienced an inclination to laugh. He sat down and wrote as he had never written before—as he would never write again. A seriousness overshadowed Peter's flamboyant countenance as he read the screed over. "One would

think," he hazarded slowly, "that you meant all this."

"You asked me to write as I would write to the girl I loved well enough to marry, and I have done so."

"Thanks, awfully, dear boy. This ought to fetch her."

Jardine pulled himself up, and Jennings dropped into his seat beside the table on which lay the writing materials.

"Where are you going?" he asked, for Jardine was dragging on his boots.

"I'm going to ride over to Auger's. I must see about that carload we are to ship to St. Joe, Tuesday." He looked white and tired.

"Are you ill? You look—queer, somehow."

"Thanks—I'm all right. I believe it's going to rain."

It did rain that evening. More than that, it blew. It also thundered and lightened, by way of diversion. After the late intense heat, the wind, rushing down from the Dakotas, was penetratingly cold. An acclimated Nebraskan

accepts philosophically such sudden changes of weather and makes shift to avoid their most disagreeable features. But Jennings, plodding into town to mail the letter he had laboriously copied, did not dream of seeking shelter when the storm broke. He battled on, safely consigned his letter, then hired a livery rig, and drove back to his shack. He was wet to the skin, and chilled from head to feet. All night he lay with burning brow, icy hands, and a strange, spasmodic pain in his side. His man hurried for Jardine at dawn. Jardine sent immediately to the county seat for a physician, and then hastened to his partner.

"Looks like pneumonia," the doctor said, when he came. It was pneumonia. Jardine did all for Peter that one man could do for another. He devoted himself to him. He cabled his relatives. He procured the best nurse to be had. But during the week that followed the sick man burned and writhed in fever, babbled deliriously, strove to cough,

and had intervals of sanity that were more painful to those about him than were his periods of unconsciousness. It was during one of these intervals that the mail was handed to Jardine.

"Look," Jennings whispered. "See if there is a reply from her." Jardine started. He had never supposed that Jennings copied and mailed the letter the day it was written—the evening of the storm. He must have done so to expect a reply now.

"There!" cried Peter. "I see it! I can get the perfume of violets. Open it," he begged.

But Jardine hesitated, the unopened envelope extended. "Open it! Read it!" Jennings insisted. "You have known the rest. You may as well know this. What is her answer? What does she say?"

Jardine tore off the envelope, skimmed the contents. Then, very slowly, he read aloud:

Dear Mr. Jennings:—Your letter, which honors me, I have just received. I—,"

There was a silence. "Why," Peter murmured, impatiently, "are you waiting?"

"When you spoke to me before I left Nebraska, I could not answer as you wished. Now——"

There was another period of hesitation.

"Now—I find my feelings toward you have undergone a change. I look forward with happy anticipation to meeting you again. I shall go out to my brother's in the Fall. I shall say—nothing—more definite now. So—until we meet——

Believe me, your friend,

IVERA LYLE.

The sick man's face was transfigured.

"How happy I am!" he cried. "How happy! And I owe it all to you, dear boy—all to you!"

These were the last intelligible words he ever spoke. When the dawn crept in like a thief Peter Jennings was dead.

CHAPTER XIX.

"Why, how now? Ho! from whence ariseth this?"

—*Othello.*

THEY buried the young Englishman on the Kansas hill. Jardine sent copies of the county papers containing mention of his death to Miss Lyle, and to his parents. He forwarded the latter, also a draft that very generously covered Peter's interest in the ranch, and wrote them a long, kindly, comforting letter. He burned the private papers of his friend in accordance with the preference of his people. He burned, too, the last letter Ivera Lyle had written Jennings, but not before—feeling traitorous, but justified—he had re-read it.

Dear Mr. Jennings:—Your letter, which honors me, I have just received. I cannot tell you how strangely it affects me. When you spoke to me before I left Nebraska, I could not answer as you wished—nor can I now.

But our correspondence has been so full of surprise and pleasure I find my feelings toward you have undergone a change. Your letters have made me happily anticipate meeting you again. I shall go out to my brother's in the Fall, when I hope our very cordial intellectual sympathy may merge into personal friendship. Believe me, if my heart were mine to give your latest letter would have won it. Your friend,
IVERA LYLE.

There was a terrible drouth that year. Before June was gone the corn was doomed. Day after day the horrible heat prevailed—increased. July came in with skies of brass, fierce, scorching winds blowing up from the south, winds that drove fine, white, stinging dust in billows before them; winds that even at night did not cease, but shrieked and whined, and mockingly puffed its hot breath in the faces of gasping humanity. Men looked out with haggard eyes over the land they had plowed and planted and saw how, with each day, the green ranks were becoming more dwarfed and yellow. The creek was dry. Cattle died along its banks. The leaves of

the oaks and cottonwoods no longer rustled—they rattled. Women on the farms milked, and scrubbed, and churned, and cooked, and economized. Men hung around the pool room and the saloon, and blasphemed, and drank more than was good for them, and plodded back to their homes in the yellow evening glare, morose and irritable. Desperation lived in many hearts. July was almost merged in August, and still no merciful rain had fallen. Disease became epidemic. Fresh meat could not be procured. Ice was an unknown luxury. The dry and dewless nights brought no relief. Eldridge, driving over the prairies in his ramshackle buggy, glancing from parched sod to pitiless sky, comprehending all the horror of the heat, seeing little children as surely being done to death by swarms of flies as were ever honey-smeared, crucified Chinese malefactors, decided—being fortified by frequent administrations of morphine—that there was no God in heaven, no compassion nor su-

preme intelligence anywhere. He was driving up from Kansas one brazen, blowing afternoon, after an all-night siege beside a sick bed. As he passed, he glanced in at the lonely little graveyard on the hill. He could no more refrain from doing so, when he came upon it, than Eugene Aram could leave unvisited the body of his victim. Regardless of the fact that a precipitous descent lay ahead, he lashed his horse. The animal dashed downward, the rickety buggy lying almost across his haunches. As Eldridge swung around a curve he saw that there was a vehicle ahead of him. Still farther down a bridge spanned the dry bed of the creek. The bridge was narrow, and was unprotected at the sides.

"Hi, there!" Eldridge yelled to the man ahead. "Turn out there! I can't."

But the foremost buggy had already rolled on the bridge when the doctor's uncontrollable horse bore down upon it. There was a crash—a crackling of oaths.

The driver ahead leaped up, whipped his animal. It sprang forward—none too soon. For an instant both buggies had jolted and swayed on the narrow bridge. Only the quick action of the first driver had prevented a double disaster. But once across he bounded from the buggy, and, choking with rage, confronted the man who had so nearly run him down.

“Are you crazy?” he yelled, grabbing the rein of the second horse near the bit. “You’re crazy or—oh, it’s you, is it?” as he recognized Eldridge. “I might have known only a drugged fool would have done such a rotten trick. We’d both have been over the edge in another second.”

“I tried to stop the mare, but I couldn’t turn her out,” growled Eldridge. “Wait a minute, Lyle. I’ve been wanting to see you.” He got out of his rig. The panting horses stood still. “I wish,” Eldridge went on, fumbling in his pocket, “if you know where Prior is, you’d send him this roll. He gave

it to me before he left. I've been thinking it over, and I can't keep it. I'm not entitled to any extra money."

Robert Lyle looked at him blankly. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said.

"Oh, yes, you do. I admit I wasn't quite myself when I made out that certificate, but I believed what you boys told me. I thought it was all right."

Lyle knew to what he was referring then. "Well, wasn't it all right?" he questioned, savagely. The sun blazed down on them. The white, powdery dust whirled all around them in fluctuant waves and vanishing spirals.

"I don't know," Eldridge answered, doubtfully. "I wish to God I did! When Prior handed me this money, and I objected to taking it, he said in that sneering, little impudent way of his: 'When rich knaves have need of poor ones, poor ones may make what price they will!' Then I heard that your sister considered there was something wrong in the manner of his death.

I don't know what she discovered, but—"

"I know. She discovered that the man for whom you issued a certificate of death is no more dead than I am!"

"Not dead!" shrieked Eldridge. "I saw him dead. He was dead when you or Prior—one of you—brought me down to the office that night. I didn't make a thorough examination, I know. But I believed what I was told about his symptoms and so on. I saw that he was dead. I gave you boys the certificate you asked for. And now you tell me he isn't buried on that hill back there?"

"I mean to tell you he isn't buried anywhere."

"I've always thought there was some deviltry afloat that night, but I could never put my finger on the nature of it. I thought afterward that maybe you boys had some motive for putting him out of the way."

"Oh, he's out of the way all right!"

"What do you mean by that?"

The tattered corn at either side of the road rattled in a mighty surge of hot wind, as the men stood in the white dust and looked hard at each other. It was like breathing flame to breathe the air that enveloped them. The exciting talk had gone to their heads like liquor. Both were sick and dizzy.

"See here," Rob advised, slowly and insolently. "You stick to your hypodermic syringe, will you, and leave other people's affairs alone?"

The physician's pale, flabby face was twitching. "I'm not denying I've got pretty low down," he said, in a voice that quivered with self-scorn. "I pay a bitter penalty, God knows! But I won't willingly be accessory to a crime. What did you do with that young fellow?"

Eldridge's failure to resent his cruel taunt, the despairing voice in which he had spoken, a sense of his own unmanliness, overwhelmed Rob with sudden shame and pity. Impulsively he thrust his hand into his hip pocket. Before

he could withdraw it Eldridge had jerked out a revolver and shot him.

Lyle stood erect a moment, then toppled forward in the velvety dust. The letter he had pulled from his pocket, in falling dropped from his nerveless hand. His horse, frightened by the report of the revolver, was tearing toward town, the light vehicle rocking after it. Eldridge stood looking stupidly down on his victim. A letter! Was that what he reached for when he put his hand back? The doctor picked it up—read it. It contained an answer to the question he had just asked Lyle concerning the fate of Mark Dudley.

Eldridge looked wildly around. Men were running from the fields—from the town. He slipped the letter back in Rob's pocket. People came hurrying up. There was an excited outcry—a hurricane of questions. Eldridge had turned Rob over. He was kneeling beside him, his finger on the wrist of the prostrate man.

"He isn't dead!" Eldridge cried.

"Thank God for that. Get him out of the sun quick!"

"You shot him!" several voices shouted.

"Yes, I shot him. We had some words. I thought he was going to pull a gun. I acted, as I supposed, in self-defense."

A litter was hastily prepared. The marshal, who had been bending over Rob, stood up, addressed Eldridge.

"Lyle never carried a gun. He hasn't one now."

"I found that out too late. I'll go with you, Peters. Bill Hicks, you look after my horse, like a good fellow. What in thunder are you all staring about? Why don't some of you wire for a physician?" A brief silence followed the indignant outbreak. Then a thin voice yelped maliciously: "Why don't you tend to him yourself?"

"By God, I will if you'll let me!" Eldridge looked toward the marshal.

"Go ahead!" said that official. The next moment the doctor was down in

the dust beside the wounded man, nervously unbuttoning the buttons of his coat and vest. He pulled up the shirt, found the bullet hole. "Hand me my bag!" he called. Someone took it out of his buggy and passed it to him. He worked rapidly, deftly. He probed, applied saturated lint, bandaged. "There! I don't think he'll die. That will depend chiefly on the care he gets. Better take him out on the farm, though. That hotel isn't fit for a hog to live—or die, in. Wait you, Dan Joyce!" He had taken a pad from his pocket, and was scribbling on it directions and prescriptions. "See about these, and get Doc Hayes down from the county seat as soon as you can. Until he comes follow the directions I've written, and give him the medicines. Now, Peters, I'll go with you!" He and the marshal walked off together—the rest following. Jardine met them.

"We'll take him out to my place, boys," he said. "I'll take care of him, and I can do it more conveniently there.

I've a rig ready at the livery. Hicks, you go out to Rob's and help his man look after the stock. I'll be responsible."

He stopped a minute at the depot to telegraph to Ivera Lyle:

"Rob seriously, but not fatally, injured. Will keep you informed of his condition."

"JOHN TREVOR JARDINE."

He had purposely refrained from inferring that she should come, but he watched every train from the East after it was reasonable to suppose she might arrive. But when the train came in on the evening of the tenth day, and she was not on board, he gave up hope, and went back to the shack feeling miserably depressed. To be sure she had wired for particulars, and he had replied, and had written her a daily bulletin afterward. He had tried hard to persuade himself that he was not hungrily hoping she would come. Rob looked up at him when he entered.

"No letter from Ive?"

"No letter."

"It's several days since I had one. I've had a sneaking fancy she might come out. But I guess she won't. I was devilish mean to her when she was here. Is there any chance of rain?"

Jardine gave a short laugh. "You optimistic idiot. Does it ever rain in Nebraska?"

Rob moved restlessly. The day had been long and hot. He was weary of pain and of enforced repose. "I wish," he said, his voice petulant and wistful as a child's, "I wish Ivera would come!" A shadow fell across the bare floor. There was a faint fragrance in the room. Jardine sprang up, his pulses throbbing madly. A slender woman was stooping over Rob.

"Ivera has come, dear," she said.

CHAPTER XX.

"Truly, I would the gods had made thee poetical."

—*As You Like It.*

IT was August. There had been a few futile rains. The coming of these had brought a glimmer of hope for the late corn—their lack of fulfillment a fresh despair. A bit of a cloud would come up. Men and women held their breath while they watched it. Then there was a damp drift. The soil was moistened. A few hours later the dust was whirling again, and the sound of the corn, as the wind swept it, was harsher than before.

"I had given you up when you came," Jack said to Ivera the day she arrived.

"You were expecting me, then?"

"Well, not exactly, but I hung around the trains from the East. If you had

not come via the Santa Fé and driven over, I should surely have met you."

She had been almost two weeks at Jardine's ranch. He had betaken himself to the shack Jennings had occupied. Several of Ivera's former acquaintances had called. One of these visitors was Mollie. She was radiant in the most tawdry finery—blue silk gown, yellow kid gloves, and a hat adorned with a profusion of cotton lace rosettes and purple pink roses.

"I like to come work for you here," said Mollie.

Miss Lyle recollected a great many things all at once. "Oh, no—not here. You are very fine, Mollie."

Mollie cast a complacent eye upon her gown.

"Yes," she agreed, in a satisfied tone.

"Henry—he buy me all."

"Henry? What is his other name?"

"I never hear any other name," Mollie replied, indifferently. "Folks call him Dutch Henry."

"Well, what is Dutch Henry to you?"

"Him's my husband," said Mollie.

"Mollie, you are married?"

Mollie nodded, "Most a month. Him good section hand. Him got money saved up. Him give me all him got, so I marry him. I buy lots of clothes. I trade for bracelet—see bracelet!" She held out her arm. The thick, red wrist was encircled by a heavy band of rolled gold.

"Where did you get that, Mollie?"

A gratified smile passed over Mollie's rosy face. "Made good trade for it. Traded to Mary Cheropsky."

"What did you trade for it?"

"Plate an' handles off baby coffin," returned the bride of Dutch Henry, cheerfully. It was a scorching noontide. The little room in which they sat was darkened. In the dim light, Mollie, sumptuously proportioned and brightly gowned, was a striking figure.

"I should not think you would like a stranger to have those," Miss Lyle said. "You were anxious to get them, I remember, to remind you of your baby."

Mollie twisted the gaudy ornament on her wrist. "I know, but I got tired them. Him never well baby. Dutch Henry say better little Mark die."

Ivera Lyle caught her breath.

"Mark! Was that the baby's name? Why—why—" She choked up and could utter no further word.

"Him called after him father," said Mollie.

Ivera trembled to her feet. A cry broke faintly from her lips. "But you said—"

Mollie laughed pleasantly. "I did say that morning when I leave, I not want him to love you. It make me mad, then. Now, I not care. I got Henry. You think I mean Mr. Jardine. I say yes, for I not want you know about Mark Dudley. Mr. Jardine give me money never let you know about him. He say it make you feel bad to know. Do you feel bad?"

"Go," Ivera besought her in a low voice. "Go, Mollie."

Jack Jardine, stepping upon the porch,

heard the entreaty. His glance went swiftly from one woman to the other. Mollie smiled broadly at him in all the arrogance of her ignorance.

"I work here cheap," she said, "while Henry off on new road, but Miss Lyle her not want me."

Jardine motioned to the door.

With a toss of her berosed head and a swish of her skirts Mollie disappeared. Ivera sank down on a chair. Jardine went up to her.

"Was she annoying you?" he asked.

She strove to smile indifferently up at him, but in the same minute she had turned her head away, and was crying softly. His face reddened through all its tan as he looked down on her. He could see the ruffled tawny hair, the edge of a pink ear, the slender waist.

"Don't," he implored, "let anything that creature could say grieve you."

"You don't know how I have misjudged you."

"Never mind about that."

"Ah, but I must," she murmured,

with quivering lips. "You can't understand what—what I thought."

"Perhaps I can. If you insist on deeming yourself a sinner, here is your penance—and absolution."

He bent and his lips lightly touched her soft hair. Then he was out of the house, on horseback, and riding rapidly away.

"You must make haste and get strong," Ivera said to Rob, as she sat beside him that night. "We can't stay here longer. We have crowded Mr. Jardine out of his own house. I understand you have sold out of the grain business. You shall make arrangements to leave the farm in the hands of some persons you can trust. You and I will go back to Illinois. The lake breezes will soon make you my own strong boy again. I came as soon as I could. I was dreadfully afraid you were going to die, Rob."

"I came pretty close to it, dear. I've had time enough to think while I have been lying here,—and—I'm not a pray-

ing fellow, you know, but I do believe in God Almighty—I promised Him if I recovered I'd make a clean breast about Mark. Will you listen now?"

For the first time she turned coward. "In a little while," she said. She walked to the door of the shack, and out into the white, hot night. The wind had gone down. The plains stretched away, boundless and mysterious. The sky, frigated with whitish clouds, loomed low and light. Between these crept the silence, the awful, oppressive, overwhelming silence of the prairies. It seemed to close around the girl standing there in gigantic coils that crushed out individuality—almost extinguished identity. An impulse to scream as if in a nightmare frenzy—anything to break the spell, came to her. She said something on the subject to Rob when she went back to the little lighted room.

"Yes," he declared, "the silence is damnable. I don't feel such things as acutely as you do, but it has hurt me many a time. When I was in New

Orleans I saw a mob drag along Tchou-pitous street a nigger whom they were going to lynch. The screeching of the victim and the hooting of the rabble were the most atrocious sounds I ever heard. I put my hands over my ears to keep them out. Since I've lived on the plains, I find there is one thing worse than any sound, and that is silence."

"We ought to rejoice in the sacredness of this desolate world. We ought to find charm in its aloofness—its serenity."

"Well, we don't. No one who lives their lives out here can do anything of the sort. The only people who associate solitude, romance and all that sort of thing with the plains are those who write about them without having had any personal experience. You have seen and studied Western women—those of the small towns and farms, I mean. The young women are sometimes pretty, generally vulgar, always foolish. The middle-aged women are the old women

—a set of drab-colored, toothless, petty-minded old crones.

“I know that sounds hard, but it is true. There are no old people. There are many prematurely old. I took Mollie’s mother to be seventy, at least, and Mollie told me she was younger than that handsome brigand, her husband, and had a baby about the age of Mollie’s own.”

“Bohemian women age rapidly.”

“All women age rapidly out here. There is the unceasing work, the wind, the heat, the dust storms. There is absolutely no mental activity.”

“Dear child, what would they do with mental activity?”

“Don’t laugh, Rob. They have time to talk together, but the conversation, God save the mark! is always of the short comings of their acquaintances, or patchwork, or carpet rags. One woman said to me: ‘I pieced four quilts last winter. When I got them done I patched another with the pieces that was left after piecin’ the

others. There was two hundred blocks in this, an' every block had fifty pieces in it, an' they wasn't no block bigger'n a cent.' Think of that."

"I'd rather not!" laughed Rob.

They were silent. Both knew they had been talking against time. Ivera looked around the little whitewashed room, in one corner of which a glass lamp burned, and then back to the bed with its gay covering of a striped English blanket, the vividness of which accentuated the pallor of the face upon the pillow. Their eyes met.

"Dear," she said, "tell me now."

He told her, his nervous fingers touching the airy folds of her summer gown that had drifted within his reach. Ten—fifteen—twenty minutes. It was told. She had not stirred nor spoken.

"The letter that I was about to show to Eldridge when he misconstrued the motion I made, is in the pocket of my coat over there. It is the last letter Jardine received from the physician."

She stood up, found the letter—read

it. She came back and sat down at the bedside. She was white as her gown. Rob's eyes, shrinking and beseeching, were fastened on her face.

"I would never have had anything to do with it, I've," he asserted, piteously, "if I'd supposed there was any real danger. I wonder if you can ever forgive me?"

"You know I love you." Then her eyes brimmed over.

"But,"—there was a catch in his voice—"I don't deserve your love, dear."

"If that is really so, you need it all the more."

CHAPTER XXI.

"I pray thee, let us go and find him out."

—*The Merchant of Venice.*

THEY were sitting out on the porch—Rob, pale and handsome in his interesting role of convalescent, Ivera, with all her bright hair unbound over a gown that was blue and misty. She held a little morocco covered book. The lines she read would have been almost unintelligible when Rob claimed the diary. They were lucid and full of interest now:

July 10.—"Hang the luck! Must buy M. C. off some way if I am to bring I. here.

July 20.—Great scheme of Prior's. Sounds a bit risky, though.

August 3.—Seems safe enough. Have insured in their favor—Prior's, rather.

August 6.—That damned saint of a Jardine suspects something. I'm rattled. I'll have to let old rye alone a while, I guess.

August 14.—Jardine caught on, confound

him. Forced to postpone plan. A desperate game, but the tests worked all right.

August 27.—Played it slick on old Eldridge. Sore throat. Cardiac suffering—general illness. Must burn this book before—

August 30.—Prior says now that that preaching Jardine has gone East is the time to risk it. So one of these nights—Great Scott! if Prior should prove to be a fool or a scoundrel!"

"Up?" cried a familiar voice.
"That's good."

Jardine dropped off his horse, and lounged toward the doorway.

Ivera retreated at sight of him.

"Jack—I've told her!"

Jardine's face took on a certain rigidity, and his lips shut firm and tight. Then he asked: "How did she bear it?" But at the same instant he lifted his hand. "Don't tell me! I am sure she endured as she ventured—'Like a gallant lady.'"

Rob nodded, looking out with wet eyes across the withered world.

"She will not be satisfied until she has seen him," he said.

"I can understand how she feels about that. I will take her whenever you may be left alone."

"Never mind me. Saunders can attend to me. Take her, and get the final torture over. Why can't you go to-morrow?"

So it was agreed they should leave the following morning. "It will be a long drive," Jardine had said, "twenty-four miles from here to the town in Kansas where we take the train."

They drove across the prairies in the exultance of the sunrise. "We must pass through Bubble," Jardine said to Ivera. "Won't you stop a few minutes to see Mrs. Mc?"

"It is so early!"

"Not for her."

They found the old lady sitting on her back steps. Involuntary deference to conventionality induced her to tuck her bare feet under her calico wrapper when Ivera appeared. The gown was open at the neck, and the strong, brown, withered old throat showed in the gap.

"Mornin'!" she said, affably. "I heerd you was out here again, an' I kep' a-wonderin' ef you'd come see me. I'd have gone to see you ef them legs of mine 'ud only let me. Rob Lyle's gittin' better, ain't he? I never see such a man fur gettin' better. They can't do a thing to Eldridge—more's the pity!"

"I hope Mr. McLelland is well."

"Oh, he's well enough, but he's worried. Business is slack, though we did think it would pick up after the water got low in the wells. Pa don't git his coffings from St. Joe no more."

"No?"

"No, the glass he used to git from there was that streaky he hadn't the stability to look a deceased in the face through it. It took a whole nickel's worth of alcohol to clean one glass in them coffings. 'Pa,' I says to him, 'don't you let nobody become contagious of the fact that you use alcohol for that purpose. S'posin', I says, 'a dead prohibitionist should come to you for a coffin?'"

"That would be embarrassing. But Mr. McLelland is so clever, I am sure he would find a way out of even such a dilemma as that."

She laughed—a complacent and unctuous laugh, that ended in a gurgle deep down in her capacious bosom. "Yes, there ain't nothin' stupid about Pa or me. Pa says I'm a heap smarter'n him, but then I don't never take stock in a man praisin' his wife—specially when it's fur bein' economical. The praise only means that he'll think more of her ef she gits even economicler. I done a heap fur Pa. I ain't spent a dime fur twenty year I didn't look at twice. I saved fur him, an' raised chickens an' turkeys, an' ain't had but two wool dresses to my back in all that time—never a silk one in the hull thirty year, an' only onct a pair of kid gloves."

She stopped, looking out dreamily over the yellow roofs rising around.

"Mr. McLelland must be proud of you," Ivera ventured.

"Oh, he air. Pa 'lows he wouldn't

be fixed like he is ef it wasn't fur me. He says he couldn't have bought out the undertakin' of Mahasby fur ten year to come, ef it warn't fur the way I rustled and saved. His first wife she was only a bit of a girl—friv'lous, I jedge, as they make 'em. She allus had pretty clothes, an' they say she could sing sweeter'n any bird. But she couldn't cook none to speak on, an' she never saved a carpet rag, or pieced a quilt. She was jest fearful friv'lous—Annie was."

Ivera scarcely knew what was expected of her. She was silent.

"Yes," the old lady proceeded, "Pa sets a heap by me. But somehow, when he talks nights—some folks does you know—I ain't ever heerd him propitiate my name."

"Yes?" very gently.

The old eyes were blinking fast.

"It's allus her'n. Seems like he keeps a-dreamin' of that little thing that was berrid with her baby when she wasn't but nineteen come her next birth-

day. 'Tain't reel satisfactory after you've been layin' down by the side of a man fur mor'n thirty year to have him stir an' call you Annie when your given name's Maria."

Jardine pointed out with his whip the scattered dwellings as they drove south in Kansas.

"Those bake ovens are bad enough for any woman to spend her days in," he said, "but for some women they are worse than for others. I have known instances where women have come out here who were no more fitted to endure the isolation, the intellectual poverty, the grinding routine of ignoble tasks, than a blooded racer is fitted for the plowshare. And yet, in a way, such a woman as one of these makes the most magnificent success of her life. Hardy says in one of his earlier novels that when a strong woman deliberately throws away her strength she is weaker than a woman who has never had any strength to throw away. I don't know if I make myself understood when I

speaking of such a woman as being lofty enough to submit, strong enough to surrender, passionate enough to be silent."

"I understand."

"I am sure you do. It was all excellent while the first excitement—the first enthusiasm lasted. But it seemed after a while as if something gave way—mentally or physically. No one who has not given up the thing they love sublimely—art, music, literature, sympathy, congenial companionship, as the case may be—can offer any reason for the breakdown. Therefore they say'—he pulled himself up—'why daub ourselves by seeking roots for nettles?'"

Driving along the high, level land in Northern Kansas they fell to talking of Mark Dudley.

"I suspected the boys were up to some scheme, but how dangerous I did not know until, coming in unexpectedly one night, I found Mark rigid—apparently lifeless. Prior and Rob laughed at me, and insisted he would be all right in a few hours. Soon after he was as

well as ever. I had known that Dudley had insured his life for Prior, who was to divide with Rob. The reason for that singular transaction was then made clear to me. Prior knew only enough of chemistry to make it a deadly power in his hands. When I taxed them with the discovery of their reckless plan they admitted, but promised to abandon it. About that time I was called East. When I returned I let myself into the office with a key I always carried, often being detained late in town. The scene I saw you witnessed as plainly as I did. The blinds were down. Mark lay like a corpse on the lounge. In the rear of the office Prior was filling the bag which was to occupy the coffin. Rob knew that the test was to be made that night, but he was not then present. I raged when I learned that this trance was to last twenty hours."

"Why did you not insist—"

"I tried to, but Prior's apparent control of the situation, as well as his knowledge of its cause, were too much for me.

It seemed that he, Rob and Mark had gone into this as the easiest way of raising money. Prior had proven by experiments that he could place Mark in this condition so closely simulating death, and later revive him. He was to be spirited out of the state and the insurance money divided. Later, he could concoct, for the benefit of those who knew him in the East, any fairy tale to suit the occasion."

"But if you had called a physician—attempted resuscitation?"

"There was no medical man nearer than twenty miles—except Eldridge. You know what he is. Prior declared that to make any attempt before a certain time to restore consciousness would fail of effect. I persisted. He evidently made a sincere effort. It was a failure. He was so confident that later his attempts would be successful he almost persuaded me. 'No doctor,' he vowed, 'can handle this case intelligently. I know how I put him in such a condition. I know how I can bring him

out of it. But I must have the full time on which I reckoned. To-night I shall inject a dose of the restorative fluid, and use other means to bring him to life. My methods shall prove as efficacious then as they have formerly.' ”

“He really believed in the harmlessness of his experiment?”

“As far as most fanatics do. He cared little when he discovered his failure. All the time the funeral was winding up the hill, I knew that the body of the man whom all but two of those present fancied they were interring, lay stark on a bed in the little room of the office.”

The horrible heat of the day was beginning, but the girl sitting next to Jardine shivered as if with cold.

“That night Prior hypodermically injected the fluid. It produced no effect. Again and again the needle punctured the flesh of the man, who was, to all appearances, dead. At last we imagined we detected a quiver of the limbs. His eyes blazing, his hands shaking,

Prior once more pressed in the potent needle. He withdrew it—plunged it again into the fluid that was to recall life. ‘The lids moved,’ he gasped. I pried open the clenched teeth—poured stimulants down. A galvanic life ran through the frame. Then—then—*it* sat erect, and looked at us with—the eyes of a madman!”

Neither spoke for a minute or so. Then Ivera Lyle said: “Go on!”

“I’m afraid some of this is repetition. I don’t know how explicitly Rob has told you the story of it all. I knew only expert skill could restore reason. I got a rig. We lifted him in. By the way, just outside town Moll Chourka stopped me. The lantern I carried made her suppose the doctor—for whom she was looking—was in the buggy. She recognized Mark, and spoke of the fact to me later. I drove eighteen miles through the night with that senseless, gibbering thing beside me.”

That night Ivera Lyle and Jack Jar-

dine stood together at the bedside of a dying man.

"You are only in time," the physician said.

Ivera looked sadly down on the face she had held dear. Lack of intelligence was its least fault. It bore lines of dissipation—of vice. But suddenly it was beautiful.

"Ivera! You have come! I have tried so hard to remember. I know now. You too, Jack! I wish I'd taken your advice, old fellow! I called you Ivera—I called out to you to help me. Hi!" with a shout, "drive up on that scale there! Fourteen hundred and fifty! Oats? Oats thirty cents. I can't marry you, Mollie. Yes, you're just as pretty as the girl back East, but that ain't it—I—"

He sprang up in bed. Attendants moved forward. Jardine offered Ivera his arm. "Come!" he whispered.

"Yes," seconded the doctor, "go! Even this gleam of consciousness is unusual. He will recognize no one again."

CHAPTER XXII.

"There's beggary in the love that can be reckoned!"

—*Anthony and Cleopatra.*

IT was the day before the Lyles were to go East. Ivera had been from the farm to the ranch and back again, intent on many matters. Rob was willing to leave all the preparations for departure to her. His was a leaning nature, and he sweetly allowed those who wished to bear his burdens the privilege of doing so.

The hot, windy September day was nearing a close when the girl found herself in town. The glare was blinding. The heat was the heat of a furnace. The driven dust circled and swirled, and powdered one's garments, and stung the flesh like burning needles. Several of the men lounging in the shade of the lumber-yard office looked after her.

"Goin' back East, they say."

"She's in great luck."

"Luckier fur him. Rob was drinkin' himself to death when she come!"

"She weren't made fur here, nohow."

"I dunno," said the crippled cobbler, "what was made fur here anyhow, except gophers and jack rabbits."

"I tell you what," said the agent, expectorating with much accuracy of aim, "it was a cruel wrong to us when this country was taken from the Indians. Now, I vote it be left to the Bohemians. They're the only folks who can live here and retain any fear of hell."

"Ain't you got any, Colonel?"

"Not now. I'm acclimated."

Ivera was on her way to visit some children in whom she was interested, when a huge, panting form barred her way.

"I seen you drive past," puffed Mrs. McLelland, "so I put my shoes on an' my teeth in, an' come to bid you adoo."

Ivera, looking aggravatingly cool and

prodigiously pretty, smiled frankly up at her.

"It is very kind of you. I shall offer think of you."

"I'll think of you, too. Lots of us will keep on doin' that. But I'm glad you're goin' fur your own sake. Land when I think of the time I lived only a hundred an' twenty mile from Chicago! It's a good thing to git out'n Nebraska before you're carried out. That's what I say. Not that I ought to complain at present. Business is spry now, but it has its ameliorations."

"Yes?"

"Yes," mournfully. "There was Pa, give the most attractive coffin he had in stock to the Stivers when their baby died—give it fur only three dollars an' seventy cents profit because it had been in stock a long time, the infant it had been bought fur original havin' been took away from here by its parents before it got time to die, an' surrenderin' its mortal breath in lowy. Well, Pa went in to collect from Stiver—who's the

druggist, you know. An' Pa told him how cheap he let him have it at twenty-one dollar, seein' the wood was a bit chipped an' the linin' somewhat fly-specked. Stiver paid Pa, an' Pa he says, 'Seein' you got a bargain, I think you ought to set up the sody water.' An' would you believe it, that man says reel sharp, 'I don't set up the sody water on a dead baby!' Think of that fur gratitood, now!"

"Dear! Dear!" said Ivera.

"I knowed you'd see the meanness of the man. I tell you what, this weather is awful promiscuous on a body. It pretty near dilapidates me."

"You are not looking very well."

"I ain't well. I had the doctor yis-tiday. I've needed doctorin' fur nigh onto seven year, but I wouldn't pay the price. The trouble seemed to be with them legs of mine, an' I says to Pa, 'I despise the idea of payin' any man a dollar to look at my lower conformities.' But at last I did, an' he says to me, 'It's dropsy or Bright's disease. I

can't tell rightly which yet.' I tell you it made me feel good to know there was something reel bad the matter with me, after I'd gone to the expense of sending fur him."

Ivera looked rather surprised, and her lips dimpled in at the corners.

"Well, good-bye," said the old lady. "Come out to see us if you git to feelin' bad."

"The climate might help me?"

"Yes, an' ef it didn't me an' Pa 'ud be your friends, an' see that everything was done decent fur you." With which ambiguous promise she lumbered away.

The starless, stirless dusk was everywhere when Ivera walked up on the hill. Without a glance she passed the headstone erected to the memory of Mark Dudley, and went to the grave where Peter Jennings slept. When she rose to her feet a tall figure stood beside her.

"I fancied I might find you here," said Jack Jardine. They were descend-

ing the hill together. "He was a good fellow," said Jardine.

"Yes," she assented eagerly, "and one who had not read his letters could not understand what a scholarly, poetic, charming character was his."

Jack murmured a word of surprise.

"Oh, indeed yes! He wrote to me, and I found his letters delightful. I have never met anyone whose ideas were so wholly mine. He was congenial in all his moods. I have kept his letters. Sometime you may like to read them."

"I should—I assure you."

"Personally he did not give one the impression of being brilliant," she proceeded warmly, "but no one could write as he did who lacked exquisite ability."

"I've no doubt he was quite exceptional," Jardine agreed.

"A student—a critic—and so great of heart," said Ivera Lyle. Jardine did not dissent. He was a mere meek echo. He sat with the brother and

sister, talking late that night. When he left Robert looked inquiringly at the corded trunks.

"Everything in, Ive?"

"I think so."

"No—we've forgotten my letters. All that came since I was shot are in the drawer of that table. Jardine said it was empty, and that I had better keep them there. Just dump them into the valise like a good girl. It isn't nearly full."

Ivera was putting the pile of business epistles into the valise, when a familiar hand attracted her. The writing was that in which the bulletins of Rob's condition had been issued. Clearly one—perhaps more—of Mr. Jardine's papers had been left in the drawer. She took the sheet out to lay it aside when something strangely familiar about the written lines caught her eye. The beginning was a quotation from Owen Meredith:

"My love, my chosen, but not mine, I send
My whole heart to thee in these words I
write!"

"I shall not say my best beloved, when I mean my only and my all-beloved!" and so on. The delicate, startled face of the reader grew rose-pink from brow to chin. That writing! Those words! The passion and the pathos of it all! She had read the letter before. Now it set her lips trembling and the pulses in her wrists beating to read it! One page—two—three—four! She knew them all by heart, down to the yearning, unfinished verse with which it ended:

"And so I write, and write, and write,
For the mere sake of writing to you, dear!"

"Ive!"

"Coming!" She crushed the letter into her pocket, and hastened to him.

They went East next day. Jardine did not write. He was afraid some trick of expression or style might betray him. In November he sold out and bought shares in a mining company. He doubled his investment, quadrupled it, and took the train for

Chicago. It was June. The lake city was cool and entrancing in the summer sunshine. Somehow he had never fancied Ivera as he found her. She was just leaving for a great function. There were diamonds in her hair, and she carried glowing roses.

It was on the rear platform of a train. The depot was left behind. The two, leaning against the rail, had eyes only for each other.

"What paper is that you are holding?" he asked.

She held it so he could see. "Did you write this, Jack? Did you," sudden light breaking in upon her, "write the original of *every* letter that Peter Jennings sent me?"

"Ivera—dearest!"

"Of course you can't answer. I should not have asked you." She tore the letter into little bits, and let the wind from the west waft them away.

THE END.

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